

IDENTITY AND  
REPRESENTATION ON THE  
INTERNET

by

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requirements for the degree of

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## Declaration

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I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work, contained in this thesis is my own original work that I have not previously in its entirety or in any part submitted at any university for a degree.



## Abstract

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This thesis investigates the ways in which identity is established and represented on the Internet. Through detailed case studies of different Internet sites, I examine the changing parameters of these concepts, and indeed of our concept of 'reality' itself. I then undertake a detailed reading of a number of films that represent the Internet as an integral part of their narrative. I make use, but also critique, postmodern understandings of identity and representation. Existing postmodern theories of identity and representation cannot fully account for the way Internet identity functions and the Internet interacts with other media and offline life. New analyses are required to explain the interactions between these concepts. This thesis uses the constructs of presence, performance, the body, and narrative to describe the way in which identity and representation function online, are represented in film and influence offline life.

## Opsomming

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Hierdie tesis beskou die maniere waarop identiteit op die internet gevestig en oorgedra word. Ek ondersoek die veranderende parameters van hierdie konsepte deur uitgebreide gevallestudies van verskillende internetruimtes te doen, en bekyk ook ons opvatting van die werklikheid self. Voorts doen ek 'n deurtastende ondersoek na 'n aantal films wat die internet as 'n integrale rolspeler in die narratief voorstel. Ek maak gebruik van, maar beoordel ook, postmodernistiese beskouings van identiteit en oordrag. Die bestaande postmodernistiese teorieë oor identiteit en oordrag kan nie volledig rekenskap gee van die wyse waarop die internet-identiteit funksioneer of hoe die internet op ander media en aptydse middele reageer nie. Nuwe ondersoeke is nodig om die wisselwerking tussen hierdie konsepte te verduidelik. Hierdie tesis gebruik die begrippe van aanwesigheid, optrede, hoofinhoud en narratief om die wyse waarop identiteit en oordrag intyds funksioneer, in film oorgedra word en aptydse middele beïnvloed, te beskryf.

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## Introduction

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The topic of this thesis, 'Identity and Representation on the Internet', developed from a fascination, both personal and intellectual, with the increasing use and representation of the Internet. The Internet, one of the most important phenomena of the twentieth century, has become an increasingly important part of many people's lives. It has become more accessible to many people worldwide because of the development of user-friendly software and relatively inexpensive Internet service providers (ISPs) and Internet cafes. The increased use of computers and the Internet has moved from the margin of subcultures to the mainstream, and even into domestic spaces. I postulate that this has led to an increased influence of computer-mediated communication on offline life. This is evident in the variety of representations of the Internet and computers in popular film. A critical awareness of the shift in computer use and representation led me to question the way in which the Internet and its related media, like email, are influencing the way we think about, and represent, ourselves. Yet research into the Internet as representation and a form of identity has only just begun.

We bring assumptions about our identities, and the ways to represent them, from offline life onto the Internet. One of the newer and more innovative features of the Internet is that it does not allow the user to create and represent his or her identity in exactly the same way as is possible in everyday offline life. This is because representation usually has to occur through text, or text and pictures, which have fewer possibilities for representation than an embodied offline identity. Hence it is necessary for the Internet user to develop alternative strategies for creating online presence and consequently identity, and to represent this identity or identities. These strategies are different from the techniques used in offline life. I am interested in examining in what way the Internet would reciprocally influence offline life.

It is this interaction between the Internet and offline life that offers us an important space for theorising and analysis. I begin the thesis by looking at how Internet users



create their identities online. This is not in itself a straightforward endeavour, as the Internet consists of multiple software interfaces through which users interact with each other. I therefore decided to isolate several different modes of Internet communication and representation and see how the software interfaces affect the communication possibilities. These are email, lists, MUDs and MOOs, chats and websites. To date several important articles studies of such media have appeared although mostly in journal articles, (see particularly the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication). Although such studies provide a range of theoretical perspectives, in the analyses of such internet media, none of the tackle more than an isolated section of the Internet media. In other words, they do not adequately look across the different Internet sites that I will be discussing in this study.

This study hopes to pose several important questions about the interaction of the Internet with fundamental ontological concepts like identity and representation. Several assumptions underlie these research questions. The concept of identity and representation are always in flux and are continuously being redefined. Sarup says: "I believe that two important features of the human subject are perpetual mobility and incompleteness." (xvi) This constant change and movement is certainly also characteristic of the Internet environment and the behaviour of users within this environment. Later in a discussion of consumer identity, Sarup goes on to say: "The market puts on display a wide range of identities from which one can select one's own. Commercial advertisements often show the commodities which they try to sell in their social context (that is, as a part of a particular life-style), so that the prospective customer can consciously purchase symbols of such self-identity as he or she would wish to possess." (125) Although this comment was made in a more specific discussion of Baudrillard's ideas of image and commodity, it once again shows the way constantly altering identity, or identity in flux, is closely linked to media. In this thesis I propose that the Internet is a growing media which is strongly starting to influence the formation and adaptation of identities, and that these changes are both conscious (as suggested in the Sarup quote) and unconscious. Sarup goes on to link identity and representation in flux, with postmodern theory when he comments: "There is a rapidly growing literature that shows that personal identities are far more complex and shifting than is usually thought, that people have multiple, apparently contradictory, identities at any one time." (126) The Internet is in part a



consequence, or development, of postmodern thought. I will suggest in this study that despite the Internet being to some extent integral to postmodernist ways of viewing the world, the way it is changing human life critiques and challenges some of postmodernism's basic assumptions. It will be shown that postmodern theory cannot be uncritically applied to the phenomenon of the Internet. This is reflected in all sorts of other media, including film. Each media form can only reflect another media with its own techniques, narratives and limitations, and so film does not reflect the Internet in a transparent way.

I begin with a theoretical discussion of some of the key concepts I use in this thesis to explain the interaction between identity and representation. This presents a challenge since there are no uniform philosophical or critical definitions of identity and representation. They are such general terms that each theorist has ascribed more specific meanings to them in terms of their own theories. There are also few theoretical writers who discuss the connections between identity and representation. Although the link between these concepts is assumed in most theoretical discussions of either identity or representation, the link is rarely spelt out, and certainly not in detail. In what follows I attempt to articulate a more explicit link between these concepts, both on theory and through a close reading of the Internet sites I discuss.

As the study of the Internet is a relatively new field there has also been very little general critical theory written. Instead, studies of the Internet are extremely specific and often anthropological in tone, as can be seen from many articles in the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication. For example in "Spoof, Spam, Lurk and Lag: the Aesthetics of Text-based Virtual Realities" Lee Ellen Marvin says that "Research was conducted using the ethnographic tool of participant-observation." She goes on to say that ethnography is used by anthropologists and folklorists. This approach is common in other articles published in this journal and authors frequently belong to the above mentioned disciplines. This thesis has not taken an ethnographical approach; although such an approach is useful I have instead focussed on text based readings of identity and representations. In order to begin to write a cultural study of the Internet, I have found it most useful to consider theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism, as discussed above, while also identifying the gaps and limits of such theorising for Internet studies.



Thus I have tried to identify a range of 'bridging concepts' in order to properly analyse notions of identity and representation, both on the Internet, and in offline media. Examples of such 'stepping stone' concepts are notions of identity 'as performance' (Sarup, Barthes and Butler) or the concept of 'presence' (Lombard & Ditton). It will be suggested that a 'performance' model of identity is useful in understanding the transition of the self to others in representation and communication. It will be questioned whether this type of understanding of identity can be used to theorise the way the effect of presence is created through the media of the Internet, and what gaps the analysis of the Internet suggest in this model of identity. When communicators meet each other face-to-face in 'real' life their presence is obvious, but in media where this is not the case, like much of the Internet, the concept of presence becomes helpful in understanding how a person can be both at an online meeting and in front of their computer terminal. This is also important in how they are perceived: do they appear to be present? Why? How do they achieve this presence? Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton discuss presence in their article, "At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence". They formulate several different meanings for the term 'presence', some of which are very useful, such as 'presence as transport' expanded in Chapter 1, to the discussion of online presence. Once again their work does not specifically concern the Internet and it is necessary to combine and compare it with other theorists who discuss the notion of presence and performance. The link between presence and performance is suggested in Chapter 1. Such theories are used to discuss the identity and representation on the Internet and the following questions are posed throughout the thesis: What are the limitations of the medium, and how are they compensated for? How closely are online and offline identities related and how do they influence each other?

As the body plays such an important role in offline presence it is crucial to investigate the role it plays in online life, and to theorise about how the body influences expressions of identity (Butler, Hayles, Biocca and Harraway). This implies, too, a focus on the question of the materiality of the body, and the way in which gender is understood. Judith Butler is a particularly important theorist of the body and its interaction with identity, and has powerfully influenced this discussion. In the Introduction to Bodies That Matter, she raises a few fundamental questions:



What are we to make of constructions without which we would not be able to think, to live, to make sense at all, those which have acquired for us a kind of necessity? Are certain constructions of the body constitutive in this sense: that we could not operate without them, that without them there would be no 'I,' no 'we'? Thinking the body as constructed demands a rethinking of the meaning of construction itself. And if certain constructions appear constitutive, that is, have this character of being 'without which' we could not think at all, we might suggest that bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas.

(xi)

Butler questions many of the most fundamental interactions between identity and the material body. This approach is particularly useful in the discussion of virtual bodies, which are entirely constructed and yet to some extent function as a representation of identity, like offline bodies. The role of gender is also relevant to the analyses that follow in Chapter 2, as the websites chosen represent women. Butler's theories will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 1 and 2, and will be contrasted with other theories that discuss the way the body interacts with identity and representation and how technology alters or challenges this relationship. Theorists like Sherry Turkle, Frank Biocca and Kathleen N. Hayles are contrasted and compared with Butler. They in all, to some extent, privilege the data or information contained in the body over its materiality, and suggest that the body is a mere substrate. By engaging with these conflicting views of the body I try to negotiate an understanding of the role of the body in online identity and representation, and the effect this online identity and representation is having on offline understanding. As much of this study is concerned with the way the computer-user interacts with the machine, the concept of the 'cyborg', as a construction of this interaction, is also carefully examined.

From this discussion it can be seen that one of the main challenges in approaching this field of research has been finding theoretical tools adequate to the reading of the Internet and other texts. As is perhaps always the case, but particularly within a sub-discipline as new as Internet studies, a range of concepts have been drawn from different bodies of theory. It is hoped that future studies will elaborate and develop the theoretical work begun in this thesis.



Film has played an important role in the representation of computer-mediated communication and technology in general. The film industry has always been interested in fantasizing about the future, and consequently technology is a popular topic of film. As can be seen from Matrix, Johnny Mnemonic, and to a lesser extent Hackers, films exaggerate the capabilities of existing technologies and predict the machines of the future. The analysis of film will show how the Internet is represented in popular media and it is postulated that this is a reflection of common perceptions of the Internet and computer technology and also the theoretical concepts related to this field. Film is often more widely watched than the Internet is used, and plays an important role in influencing the understanding of technology and how it affects us. It is argued that the Internet influences film, film influences the development of the Internet, and that people who have never used the Internet are influenced by a film mediated version of the Internet, which will often be shown to be inaccurate. In other words multiple lines of mutual construction inform the production of each of these sites; film, internet and users themselves.

The significance of this study is that it approaches the Internet as another group of multimedia texts, with their own characteristics, but integrated with other media and offline life in general. It does not see the Internet in isolation and conceptualises the Internet as reciprocally feeding into offline life, including film. Below I discuss the structure of the thesis in more detail.

The purpose of Chapter 1, "Conceptual Considerations", is to create a theoretical framework in which the analyses to follow are situated. This chapter does not propose a new theory of the Internet, but instead suggests that the Internet interacts with postmodern and post-structuralist theory in ways that challenge contemporary orthodox. This interaction requires the expansion of the concepts of identity and representation, and also sometimes draws attention to the gaps and silences in postmodern theory. Since the main foci of the thesis are the concepts of identity and representation, Chapter 1 discusses these concepts in greater detail and present them as intrinsically connected to presence, performance, the body, and text, as mentioned above. Each concept is discussed in detail and different theoretical meanings and references are described and compared. The different theoretical positions, and the



way they affect the interrelated concepts are discussed, and conflicts and gaps are pointed to.

The role of the body is very important to this study and helps to define the theoretical issues further. The online body is anchored in an offline body and challenges the way that online life can be another simulated reality. This study will hypothesise that the offline body is a fundamental part of the self and is hence a fundamental part of any online manifestation of identity, even if this identity does not realistically represent the body. The ways in which the body obtrudes onto the Internet will be examined and analysed. It will be shown that not only is the body present when photographs of the author are placed on the website, but also when a representative illustration or art work is placed online. It will also be argued that the body is represented in online text, for example in the use of emoticons like the 'smiley' : ). As suggested earlier and in Chapter 1, theories of presence and performance will be used together with theories of the body, to discuss and analyse these phenomena. The role of gender and the influence of the gendered body will be investigated, as the Internet texts feature mainly the female body. The interaction between the body and the machine, conceptualised as the cyborg, (Greco, Harraway) will be used to understand the changing role of the machine. Harraway has reworked the concept of cyborg to have social and political implications and this complex construct is very useful in the discussions in Chapter 1 and the analyses in Chapters 2 and 3. She says: "Cyborg figures... are the offspring of the implosion of subject and objects and of the natural and the artificial." (12, *Modest Witness*) Later she says: "The cyborg is the cybernetic organism, a fusion of the organic and the technological forged in particular, historical, cultural practices." (51) An elaboration of this is found in Harraway's foreword to The Cyborg's Handbook: "Cyborgs are about particular sorts of breached boundaries that confuse a specific historic people's stories about what counts as distinct categories crucial to that culture's natural-technical evolutionary narratives." (xvi) In the age of the Internet can the machine still be conceptualised in binary opposition to its user? How have these boundaries been blurred or broken? Harraway's construction of the cyborg is discussed in more detail earlier on in the thesis and especially in relation to online bodies. Many of the films to be analysed in challenge the boundaries between human and machine and literally create cyborgs – a fusion of machine and man in Harraway's sense. Once again Harraway's ideas are invaluable.



The concepts of 'text' and 'representation' are also given closer attention Chapter 1. The post-structuralist understandings of text are discussed, as well as their limits are not adequate in describing the various multimedia texts of the Internet. The role of the author of online texts is questioned and Barthes theories the readerly and writerly text are discussed. He suggests that in poststructuralist texts the emphasis moves away from the writer to the reader as the location where meaning is created. Barthes' notions of the intertextual are also discussed as a possible way of understanding Internet texts. These theories link to hypertext theory which stresses the interconnected and mutually creating style of Internet texts and claims that this makes them very different from offline texts. The more extreme claims of hypertext theory - that online texts are the materialisation of poststructuralist theory, are contested in this study, but the important idea of the intertextual is discussed and applied. The instability of Internet texts, the way they disappear from the Internet or appear only fleetingly, is isolated as an issue that complicates the theoretical understanding of the Internet, and narrative is suggested as a point of interaction between text and identity. It is suggested that the Internet has its own narrative structure created through both the interaction of the websites with related sites and characteristic structure of the medium. Narrative is considered to be closely related to identity and this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

The concept of 'representation' is related in this thesis to performance and it is suggested that performance can be seen as a continuous stream of representations of the self. Baudrillard's theories of simulation and simulacra are introduced and discussed as relevant to the Internet and films representing the Internet. Particularly the film The Matrix, draws attention to Baudrillard's theories and the idea of online life as a simulation, and even possibly a simulacra, of offline life is again given consideration.

Chapter 2 analyses several forms of Internet media. The section on email includes a theoretical section on identity and presence in text communication, and the possibilities for misrepresentation and faking. The Time magazine article, "Love Bug", gives the example of the email virus which appears to come from friends or acquaintances. Links are also made between normal mail and film, showing how



email communication interacts with other media. One of the challenges of this chapter was whether the selection would be 'representative' of the medium of email. As millions of people send email every day, the study of email texts was a particularly difficult methodological problem. Firstly, as most email texts are private there did not seem to be a way to get a representative sample of text sent, and the sheer volume of texts sent and received on any given day, presented challenges. Secondly, many email users delete emails shortly after receiving them, making it a very fleeting medium. Given these methodological questions, I decided to review some characteristics of email text based on personal experience of email communication and wide readings of list emails. As the email section partly focuses on the misrepresentation of identity through email texts, analysis of specific texts was not essential. However, this section does highlight the methodological issues facing further email research.

The section on lists, MUDs and MOOs, and chats offers a quick overview of these early Internet media. Since lists, MUDs and MOOs, and chats are older media, and are consistently changing into web-page format, I decided to briefly review their significance and characteristics. These media were also the focus of the earliest Internet studies and in some ways this subsection of Chapter 2 is a literature survey of these early studies. No specific lists, MUDs and MOOs, or chats were chosen for analysis but it can be seen from the earlier research that this media has fewer methodological problems. Researchers tend to take an anthropological approach and describe lists, MUDs and MOOs, and chats that they have been members of, and participated in for a long time. An important element of these early research topics is their belief in the utopian possibilities of the Internet. These texts are even more transient than email: the words scroll across the screen and are gone, and this poses new challenges for textual analysis. This section also predicts that these earlier media will become increasingly web-based, leading to a more 'uniform' Internet, which users have to be less specialised to use.

The section on web-pages makes up the bulk of this chapter. This is because much of the Internet is in this format and it appears as if it is going to become the main Internet interface. Together with email it is also the most broadly used format of the Internet, and this is reflected in popular media. Many offline entities, like companies and magazines, now have websites, indicating the spread of this medium offline, and the



increasing interaction between online and offline life. This increased interaction blurs and changes our understandings of identity and the body, as we interact and represent ourselves through the Internet medium. This medium demands creative and innovative ways of creating presence and performing identity. For this reason this section also contains specific theoretical subsections about embodiment; and intertextuality, identity and narrative. As in Chapter 1, Butler's theories of the materiality of the body prove useful in the discussion of these online bodies, apparently without matter. These subsections are elaborations of the earlier arguments in Chapter 1, and inform and frame the specific analyses to follow.

As this study used web-pages as its primary texts, the special characteristics of this medium will be discussed and it will be questioned how these characteristics influence the representation possible. The film texts discussed in Chapter 3 similarly have their own special qualities that will also be seen to affect the ways in which they represent the Internet and related issues. The Internet has developed sets of conventions and these influence the way users can represent themselves. This is also later linked to the idea of Internet narrative, based partly on these conventions. These conventions will be discussed in terms of homepages and web-rings.<sup>1</sup> It will be suggested that the purpose of homepages is primarily the establishment of online presence and this will be discussed in connection with Internet identity.

The Internet is made up of millions of websites and there is no one catalogue of all the sites. For this reason it is impossible to structure a study that is representative of the contents of the Internet. Instead of trying to find a large sample of websites I chose to look for web-texts that deal with the issues of identity and representation. This led me to look at homepages. Homepages are websites that are used specifically to represent user's identities. Many Internet directories list homepages, but again there is no one directory that lists all homepages. For this reason the selection of homepages is not representative. I searched the well-known Yahoo directory for homepage listings and directories, and visited all the links.

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<sup>1</sup> A web-ring is a group of interconnected sites, accessed by logging on, and often forms a forum for an online community.



After this survey I chose the directory of homepages on Michelle Johnson's "Makes Grown Men Cry" site for several reasons. The site has certain criteria for homepages listings. It is aimed at women, and the sites must be about expressing and creating online identity. The group was in this way pre-selected by Michelle Johnson and had many common characteristics that made them fruitful to analyse individually and comparatively. It was also useful to have a single gender group, as the representations of the embodied self could be compared without having to include a complex comparison of gender representations. Butler's discussions of the body, sex and gender also helped to inform a gender specific analysis. It would, however, be interesting to do similar research on male web-pages and compare findings. An interaction between parent-sites and their listed sub-sites was noticed and this became an important part of this research project and influenced the selection of other texts. Several homepages were chosen for closer analysis and comparison.

The next group of websites to be chosen were web-rings. Web-rings are groups of separate inter-linked websites. They group together according to content and it was hoped that they would show some sort of social and political affiliation associated with offline identity. Web-rings were also chosen to examine the interaction in content between linked sites and to see whether a type of narrative structure could be found. Searches on popular directories and search sites produced several lists of web-rings. They were often topic, country and language specific. "Disgruntled Housewife" was chosen because it is linked to two other large web-rings, "IndieGURL" and "Chickclick". Its content concerns women, which makes it gender specific and comparable with Johnson's site. It examines the cultural construct of femininity and by extension identity and the body. Like Johnson's site and listed sites, it emphasises the virtual and physical body. It used several different modes of representation, all unusual and creative. It used interesting intertextual references and was useful in examining the notion of Internet narratives.

An important theoretical question relating to the thesis as a whole is whether there is such a thing as Internet narratives and how these narratives function. In Chapter 2 in particular, I explore the structure and characteristics of Internet narratives and whether these challenge other understandings of the concept of narrative. This study also hopes to start to develop a methodology for researching the Internet, if only by



isolating some of the challenges facing this study. It will use the technique of textual analysis as a way of accessing the philosophical issues, and will try to determine the advantages and disadvantages of this approach.

Chapter 3, offers an analysis of four films, Johnny Mnemonic, Hackers, You've Got Mail, and The Matrix. This interrogates the way in which the Internet is represented in film, and discusses the significance of these representations. The Internet and film text are both seen as multimedia texts but the main difference is that there is an established approach to film analysis. The analysis of the films in this study is in part unconventional because there is a specific interest in the portrayal of computer use, and the films are seen as being to some extent representations of computer-mediated communication and Internet technology.

Several criteria for the choice of the films were used. The film had to be popular and widely distributed as I was interested in common fears and desires about computer technology, and more specifically the Internet. The films had to be relatively recent, as they had to reflect current technology. The realistic representation of computer media was not considered necessary, as some futuristic or fantasy films also expressed opinions about current technology. The representation of user interface in films representing technology is important. The depiction of user interface is dramatised by films and this dramatisation can be analysed to reveal the underlying assumptions and feelings about computer-mediated communication.

The main aim of this chapter is to examine the way in which these films represent the Internet and how these representations affect the way the Internet, identity and representation are conceptualised. Each of the films raises particular issues, but the analyses keep referring back to the concepts outlined in Chapter 1, examining the way in which the films influence, change and challenge the understanding of the theoretical concepts outlined here.

I am especially interested in the multiple misrepresentations of the Internet as a way of understanding its power to generate fantasy, fear and desire in the public sphere. It is questioned whether this is a consequence of the dramatisation of the Internet, and what the effects of these misrepresentation on the understanding of the Internet are. In



Johnny Mnemonic the “misrepresentations” can be seen as part of the film’s cyberpunk representations. Misrepresentation is a consistent characteristic of all these films, and this is pursued in the film chapter discussion. In Hackers the misrepresentation is analysed as an attempt to make cyber-culture fashionable. The film also makes use of a dramatised visual representation of user-interface. The film depicts computers as highly personalised and extensions of the body and identity. It also exposes the use of multiple identities, where different identities are used online and offline. You’ve Got Mail depicts the uncritical domestication of the computer and the Internet, which is in itself a misrepresentation. The use of specific software, in this case AOL, to represent the Internet interface is another misrepresentation. This film also focuses on the American experience of the Internet.

The film narratives are examined, compared and paralleled with the Internet narratives theorised in Chapter 2. These narratives function in completely different ways. The film narratives are much more linear than internet narratives but both use visual and textual intertextuality to create or compliment narrative structure. The films also portray several secondary issues related to the conceptualisation of the Internet. Matrix and Johnny Mnemonic are both futuristic films and suggest possible futures for the Internet. In Johnny Mnemonic and Hackers virtual reality equipment is used and associated with the Internet, drawing the offline body into the machine. In Johnny Mnemonic and You’ve Got Mail, the influence of multinational corporations and business power is emphasised and connected to the control and regulation of the Internet.

The films also specifically address many of the concepts discussed in Chapter 1, such as narrative, embodiment and presence. Johnny Mnemonic deals extensively with human-computer interface and creates a visual representation of the Internet. Embodiment is relevant to the representation of online life and the way this reflects and influences offline life. Johnny Mnemonic reflects this interest with embodiment and cyborgs. The positions the films take towards the cyborg is considered important and relevant. In Johnny Mnemonic the film takes an ambivalent stance to the cyborg and shows a desire to return to the ‘natural’. The notion of the natural in contrast to technological is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 as it also features in the other films. Matrix’s use of artificial intelligence and the coupling of minds with computers



again draws attention to the body and the cyborg. The use of the double self, the software self and the embodied self, creates a new type of cyborg and critically questions the role of the body in online performances. The virtual reality equipment in Hackers and Johnny Mnemonic again suggests this coupling of man and machine, and the concepts of the virtual body, simulation, and ‘the natural’ are emphasised.

Matrix prominently represents the themes of simulation and simulacra. It makes overt references to Baudrillard’s theories, making it the only film in this selection to critically engage with theory. It questions the validity of representations and reality, by offering both the viewer and the characters multiple engaging and persuasive realities. It complicates and problematises the privileging of one reality over another. In this way it refocuses the attention to the materiality of the body and this relates to the discussions of embodied identity versus virtual bodies in Chapter 2. It dramatises user-interfaces, and multiple identities. It is the most complex of the films and engages with virtually all the theoretical issues outlined in Chapter 1.

The conclusion of this thesis tries to evaluate the interactions between online identity and representation, and offline representations and identities. It compares the representation of the Internet in the films with the findings of Chapter 2, and makes some final comments on how online behaviour and identities challenge postmodern theoretical constructions.

This study hopes to show that close textual analyses of the Internet are invaluable and even indispensable to a study of the Internet as a cultural form. It will show that the Internet needs to be theorised on its own terms and that straightforward applications of post-structuralist or postmodern theory are insufficient. It hopes to illustrate that no media, including the Internet, operate in isolation and that the interactions with other media are a crucial part of the study. It hopes to draw attention to the way in which the Internet is changing how we understand everyday life.



## Chapter 1: Conceptual Considerations

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The new media of the Internet change the way identity and representation are understood. Although many theorists suggest that the Internet and online media offer the material form of poststructuralist theories about texts, I will suggest that this is a too simple translation of theory into practice. The Internet is a much more diverse set of media than is imagined by such writers, as will be illustrated in the chapters to follow.

It is perhaps at this point useful to distinguish between hypertext theory and the more general theory that will be discussed in this chapter. Hypertext theory has been developed to discuss online text. The main focus of hypertext theory is online fiction. Hypertext is different from offline text. Some of the important differences are that the text can be changed at any time, it can make use of links to travel from one text to another, and it is not read in a linear way. Arguably these texts are more like the materialisation of post-structuralist texts, than the mixed media of the whole Internet. In this chapter hypertext will be discussed in the section called 'text'. Hypertext theory takes a specific poststructuralist position and applies it to very specific texts. As this project is intended to be a much broader overview of the Internet media and the films that describe it, I have decided that a straightforward application of hypertext theory would not be useful. Instead I will attempt to isolate several concepts that underpin online identity and representation.

This chapter will discuss the notions of 'identity', 'presence', 'body', 'text' and 'representation'. These five concepts are central to the discussion of the Internet to follow. As will be shown, they are tightly interlinked concepts, and the division into different sections is an artificial separation. As these concepts are discussed it will be seen that they are all relevant to an analysis of online identity and the way it can be represented, and how this impacts on offline life. Although this thesis aims to deal mainly with "Identity and Representation on the Internet" it will be show that the other concepts are necessary to explain the way identity and representation function.



This chapter will bring together several different theoretical and philosophical models in a patchwork of meanings. This is the first step in developing a theoretical model for analysing the Internet. This chapter by no means completes this enormous task, but it is hoped that this thesis will suggest a starting point for further studies. The main goal of this chapter is to demonstrate the necessity of a critical understanding of the five chosen concepts that facilitate the analysis of the Internet and films to follow.

## **1. Identity**

One of the recent changes in the theoretical understanding of identity is the partial change from a modernist model of identity, to a postmodern model of identity. Perhaps surprisingly, Internet studies have also drawn attention to the way in which there has been no fixed break between modernist and postmodern versions of identity.

Sarup summarises the differences between modernist, which he refers to as 'traditional', and postmodern theories of identity as follows:

There are broadly speaking two models of identity. The 'traditional' view is that all the dynamics (such as class, gender, 'race') operate simultaneously to produce a coherent, unified, fixed identity. The more recent view is that identity is fabricated, constructed, in process, and that we have to consider both psychological and sociological factors. Of course, these overlap; there are psychological factors to the sociological factors, and sociological factors to the psychological factors. Neither of these models can fully explain what most people experience. Identities, our own and others, are fragmented and full of contradictions and ambiguities. (Sarup 14)

Perhaps one of the main characteristics of postmodern identity, is that there are no definable qualities of identity. The very concept has to be incomplete and constantly changing to in any way reflect the 'reality' of experienced identity. To quote Sarup again: "Identity in postmodern thought is not a thing; the self is necessarily incomplete, unfinished – it is 'the subject in progress'" (47) As the subject is in progress so too the theory can only describe this changing instability.

Descriptions such as 'fragmented' and 'multiple' can be seen as in contradiction with the modern description of identity as 'unified' and 'single'. The modern theory of identity has been seen to be composed from concepts positioned in binaries.



Deconstruction has exposed the assumptions underpinning these binary oppositions and shown how all elements of identity have been defined in opposition to their binary opposites (Foucault, Derrida). Although these oppositions have been seen to limit and confine the way identity is understood and experienced, they still play a powerful part in the identification processes. The main difference in the experience of postmodern identity is that, according to Sherry Turkle, "we do not feel compelled to rank or judge the elements of our multiplicity. We do not feel compelled to exclude what does not fit." (Turkle)

Turkle partly ascribes this acceptance of multiple, possibly contradictory identities, to computer interface. She says: "Windows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed system...The self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times. The life practice of windows is that of a decentred self that exists in many worlds, that plays many roles at the same time.' Now real life itself may be, as one of [Turkle's] subjects says, 'just one more window.'"

With this metaphor, Turkle implies several important aspects concerning identity. She introduces the notions of locality, time, presence and performance. As a person in front of the terminal switches between windows, one is usually changing one's virtual localities and hence the situations in which one is interacting. In computer communication the creation of identity has to be mediated by the interface (in this case windows), and the text typed by the individual in front of the screen. This leads to two central questions: How can text mediate an embodied identity? And how do the "roles played" by the selves create the different identities? These questions can perhaps be answered by the introduction of the concepts of presence and performance. These concepts, to be discussed more fully later in this chapter, establish a model for the creation of identity in virtual situations, and possibly to a lesser extent in "real" life.

Turkle and others see computer-mediated communication as a contributing cause to the fragmentation of the self, an element of postmodernism. This thesis will certainly suggest that the Internet and associated media challenge the theoretical understanding of identity, and the way individuals need to express and understand their own and other identities. But I believe that the way in which computer technology has



developed has also been a consequence of postmodern life and thought. Postmodern theory is intimately linked to the society and technology that it intends to describe, and neither can be seen as either cause or effect. According to theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard, “we live in a variety of social realities and occupy a series of positionalities ... there is such a vast pluralisation of experience that there is no unitary idea that holds society together anymore.” (Sarup 49)

Turkle argues in her book Life on the Screen that “the computer emerges as an object that brings postmodernism down to earth”. (Turkle) This is similar to the arguments that Internet texts are the materialisation of post-structuralism. In all of these arguments, as will be shown in more detail in the sections on text and representation, there is an over-simplification of a fairly complex situation. These arguments tend to see online life in isolation, and not in interaction with several concepts, like user-interface, offline embodiment, and the way computer media have been constructed in popular media. Computer mediated communication occurs on multiple online and offline planes simultaneously, which is why identity cannot only be discussed in terms of the Internet.

However, it is undeniable that the Internet does serve as a stage for extreme performances of postmodern identity. A significant contributing factor to this is that online performances of identity are mostly in text format, although as Chapter 2 will show, this is rapidly changing. This makes it necessary to discuss identity in combination with embodiment, questioning the way in which it is possible or necessary to perform an embodied identity. It also fundamentally links identity with narrative and text. Why is online identity more than just a text, what makes this text a performance of identity and what constitutes this performance?

Narrative, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, refers to the way in which a story is told. It has been strongly linked to identity by both modern and postmodern theorists. To put it simply: to say who we are we inevitably tell a life story. If we return to a point made earlier, that identities are constantly in the process of being constructed, it can be deduced that the narratives needed for these constructions are also constantly changing ‘texts’. Sarup articulates this idea by saying: “Identity, in my view, may be perhaps best be seen as a multi-dimensional



space in which a variety of writings blend and clash. These writings consist of many quotations from the innumerable centres of culture, ideological state apparatus and practices: parents, family, schools, the workplace, the media, the political parties, the state.” (Sarup 25) This description can fruitfully be linked to Barthes’ concept of intertextuality, in which he describes the way in which texts are made up of a tissue of different references, often without origin. Similarly, our narratives of identity are interwoven layers of quotes, all referring outwards to other cultural and social texts, but again often without specific sources. Sarup also makes the key point that these ‘writings’ clash. He is once again referring to the idea that identity is made up of fragments that do not and cannot form a unified whole.

Foucault’s notion of discourse is perhaps at this point a useful concept. He argues that social and cultural life is regulated and controlled by discourse, which is described as “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern.” ([www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/theory/foucault.htm](http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/theory/foucault.htm)) Judith Butler applies this idea of discourse and uses it to theorise the materiality of body. As will become clearer in the next sections, identity functions within social and cultural systems, within discourses that still contain and regulate their practices. Unlike the utopian idea of the Internet as the ultimate platform for liberation, these theories suggest that identity is still captive to the discourses within which it performs itself. It cannot get outside these discourses, not even on the Internet.

Even if identity is constrained by discourse it is fundamentally unstable. This is due to the instability of postmodern texts (as will be discussed further later) but also to the instability of what is known as “reality”. Postmodern theorist Baudrillard suggests that when a simulation of reality becomes interchangeable with that reality, it becomes a simulacrum. The notions of simulation are important to cyberspace, as the faking or misrepresentation of identity is a recurring theme of online discussion. This concept can once again be seen to be part of a larger offline phenomenon. Sarup says: “Insofar as identity is increasingly dependent upon images, this means that the replication of



identities, individual, corporate, institutional and political, becomes a very real possibility and problem.” (Sarup 100)

The possibilities of constructing online identities has been theorised as potentially liberating. It is thought that the Internet could be a truly democratic space in which each player is equal. This idea is encapsulated in the famous Internet joke “On the Internet no-one knows you are a dog.” Democratic notions about the Internet are to some extent idealistic because they rely on all users having access to modern computer equipment and fast Internet connection. The computer user also needs to know how to use the relevant software applications and must know how to use the “jargon dialect”.

Judith Donath, in Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community, says: “Language is also an important indication of group identity. “[R]egarding group membership, language is a key factor - an identification badge - for both self and outside perception.” [Saville-Troike 82] Language patterns evolve within the newsgroups as the participants develop idiosyncratic styles of interaction - especially phrases and abbreviations.” As computer users need numerous facilities and skills, the medium can maybe only be described as democratic within this group, and discrepancies in status will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

## **2. Presence and Performance**

As discussed briefly in the above section on identity, computer mediated communication occurs mainly through text. As computers become faster and more powerful, it is possible for users also to represent themselves through websites that contain graphics and photographs. To meet people and converse with them online is still very different from meeting them in ‘real’ life. There is no embodied entity whose hand you are shaking, whose presence is undeniable.

In offline life, the physical body is the vehicle for presence. This is very obvious and usually taken for granted. When people communicate from geographically different locations this presence is no longer so clear or unambiguous. This type of communication is not specific to computers. Writing separates readers from the embodied author as the undeniable origin of the text. The telephone is perhaps in



contrast a more embodied medium as the voice creates presence and the communication is synchronous. So, to summarise, an asynchronous communication strongly dilutes the presence of the parties involved and this destabilises any conclusions drawn about the identity of the other party. Synchronous communication, like the telephone, creates a greater sense of presence, as the voice is a direct reference to the body that produces it, and the real-time communication reduces the chances of faking.

The Internet, and related media like email, are marked by the same diffusion of presence, as they do not facilitate face-to-face meetings. Email, as asynchronous medium, only has text to represent the author. This text arrives in a different geographical location, often to a recipient who has never met the author. The author of the text is unverifiable and the only clues he or she gives his reader are through the contents and language of the text, and the signature and email address. The instability of email and the possibilities of faking are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, but of relevance to this section is the greatly reduced presence facilitated by email. To trust a communication and the information transferred, the parties need to establish their presences, and this is done through a convincing online identity. Online communicators become very attuned to judging online identities and the presences they create. They also in turn pay attention to the way in which they perform their own online identities.

The performance of online identity in order to create a convincing presence, has been discussed by Erving Goffman, who suggests that the utterances by an online individual can be divided into “expressions given” and “expressions given off”. In Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community the difference is explained as follows: “The former [expressions given] are the deliberately stated messages indicating how one wishes to be perceived; the latter [expressions given off] are the much more subtle - and sometimes unintentional - messages communicated via action and nuance. Both forms of expression are subject to deliberate manipulation, but the “expression given off” may be much harder to control. One can write “I am female”, but sustaining a voice and reactions that are convincingly a woman's may prove to be quite difficult for a man.” The instability of online gender will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.



The concept of 'presence' has up to now been simply used to denote the "I am here" performance of identity. In the article "At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence" Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton categorise the different meanings of presence by their functions. Of greatest interest are the definitions of presence as representation, and presence as transport. They describe representative presence as "the degree to which a medium can produce seemingly accurate representations of objects, events, and people -- representations that look, sound, and/or feel like the 'real' thing." Transporting presence is about the illusion of moving: "The 'you are there' concept is often used in discussions of virtual reality, which takes users to a virtual environment and leads to the suspension of dis-belief that they are in a world other than where their real bodies are located." (<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue2/lombard.html>)

Both of these definitions of presence are important in this thesis. They are both about interacting with a mediated environment. Fundamentally, the creation of online presence is a consequence of adjusting to a virtual location and the limits of this new environment, and representing a convincing or 'real', self.

There is a missing element in the translation from identity to presence and this can perhaps best be described by 'performance'. Like presence, this concept has been given several different meanings in a range of writings. It has the dramatic connotation of making a script or play come to life, the performance of a text. This meaning is partly invoked when one speaks of the way in which text performs the identity of the speaker in email, a website or chat program.

Barthes uses a more theoretical variation of performance in his essay the "Death and the Author". He proposes that the writer does not precede his text but "is born simultaneously with the text .... The fact is or it follows that *writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' ... rather it can designate exactly what linguists ... call performative." (Barthes 45) Barthes seems to suggest that all text is then necessarily performative. This means text is brought to life by the act of writing and by extension by the act of reading. The author is no longer the site of performance, the text is. This understanding of text will be discussed further in the section on text, but is of significance to the notion of identity



and presence. If the location of performance is in the written text, the presence of the identity represented in that text can also be seen to be located in the text.

This has important implications for asynchronous communication like email, or homepages. According to this extension of Barthes' idea of the performative, presence can, to some extent, be attributed to these representative texts. It is even more interesting to attempt to apply this concept to synchronous communications like chatting. This idea of the performative, perhaps extended with theatrical connotations, can then be seen to be the link between the text on the screen and the production of online presence and virtual embodiment.

Judith Butler also uses the idea of performance to discuss embodiment. She explains: "the understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains." (Butler 3) Butler makes several distinctly different points from Barthes, when she uses her version of "performativity". Butler's understanding is significantly less active. Instead of locating performance in the moment of writing, she locates it more broadly in the continuous influence of discourse on our perceptions of materiality. This broader understanding of performance can also be seen to shape the understanding of the moment of writing and the materiality that text conveys. Combinations of these modes of performance are necessary in understanding the phenomena of virtual embodiment. In virtual embodiment a textual description or series of statements create the fuller presence of an individual. The text becomes more than information, it becomes a vehicle for a type of embodiment.

### **3. Body**

The body is an aspect that keeps on resurfacing in discussions of identity and representation of the Internet. As can be seen from the section above, the body is repeatedly returned to as the main location or anchor of the self. For this reason it is important to look at the way in the body can be conceptualised or constructed, as this construction influences the way in which identity can be performed and understood.



The body is perhaps also the zone which is most challenged by technological changes. As technology develops and users interact with devices, the boundaries of the body become less solid and more difficult to fix. This has led to the development of the cyborg. The cyborg is a construction that indicates a meshing of man and machine. This construction highlights the confusion around the postmodern body.

Not all theorists feel the body is an important or essential part of the computer user's identity. Turkle feels that the body is just another substrate for information. She claims that the embodied reality is just one of several realities and not more "real" simply because it is where the body is located. She says: "Since everything is surfaces to be explored, and no surface has any more legitimacy than any other, the 'embodied' life we live on a day-to-day basis has no more reality than the role-playing games on the Internet. Instead, for the MUD player, reality becomes what is referred to as 'RL' – 'Real Life' – which is just another role-playing game." (Turkle)

In this section, and the thesis as a whole, I wish to show that the body plays a more important role than just another "surface". The body keeps intruding onto the Internet, as will be shown in the discussion of homepages and web-rings in Chapter 2. I will also argue that the body is an essential element in the construction of identity. A powerful example of this can be seen in the way the film, The Matrix, foregrounds the body.

By seeing the body as just another surface Turkle seems to emphasise the modern dualism between the body and the mind. This idea also often intrudes on discussions of technology. Analogies drawn between the mind and body, and computer hardware and software, are frequent. Early computers were modelled on the human mind and were dubbed "thinking machines". In "The Cyborg's Dilemma: Progressive Embodiment in Virtual Environments" Frank Biocca discusses the way in which the earlier metaphor is now used in reverse. He says: "Thinking of the body as an information channel, a display device, or a communication device, we emerge with the metaphor of the body as a kind of simulator for the mind." (<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue2/biocca2.html>) This metaphor creates the opportunities for the coupling of the mind with computer programs as a way of extending the display or simulation. Yet fundamentally the mind is still dependant on



the body as a substrate for its activity. It is important to note that the role of the body here is merely functional, as a sensory device through which information travels in and out.

The extreme form of this is the belief that the essential qualities of the self are independent of the body and could theoretically be isolated from the body. This idea has been popularised by cyberpunk fiction which sees the body as “meat”, an unnecessary encumbrance. Scientists have also fantasised about the separation of the “self” from the body. It is important to note that within these theories and fictions the self is equated to information. Identity is merely a by-product of this information. In the discussion of the film, Johnny Mnemonic, the idea of the self as information is analysed.

The idea of uploading the self onto a computer and similar constructions of the self as information compatible and comparable to computer information or data, has lead N. Katharine Hayles to the conclusion that we are becoming “posthuman”. By this concept she wishes to indicate the progressive tendency to reduce the importance of the body as materiality, and only conceptualise the body as information. She sees this as a dangerous development that will fundamentally alter human life.

In Bodies That Matter Judith Butler theorises the materiality of the body, and the interaction between the material body and discourse. This is an important work in re-establishing the central role of the body. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre says, “I am my body to the extent that I am”. This integration of the self with the body is very similar to Butler’s theories. She, however, places discourse in a primary position in the shaping of the material body. She discusses the difference between sex and gender, and theorises sex as not being merely a biological fact. By regarding sex as constructed, she integrates the body with discourse. This is significant, as the same discourses construct identity and gender, and make the separation of the body from the experience of the self impossible.

Butler discusses the body as a constructed concept. The body is sexed and the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualised repetition of norms. “Are certain constructions of the body constitutive in this sense: that we could not operate without



them, that there would be no 'I', no 'we'? Thinking the body as construction demands a rethinking of the meaning of construction itself." (Butler xi). By describing the constructions of the body as constitutive, Butler implies that the body exists before thought and is something without which we could not think. This places the body in an undeniably centred position that has to be a part of identity, and that necessarily influences the performance of identity.

Significantly, Butler does not regard sex as a pre-discursive quality of the body, and with this idea breaks from many previous theorists. She describes sex by saying: "'sex' is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other word, 'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time." (Butler 1) This contrasts with previous theories that see sex as an undeniable biological fact over which gender is culturally constructed.

The relative definitions and constructions of gender are important to this thesis as gender and sex are seen as fundamental parts of identity. Most of the home-pages and websites discussed are authored by women and directly and indirectly deal with gender. The prominent position of gender is seen as a type of embodiment.

## **Gender**

In Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium, Donna Haraway describes gender as "a relationship, not a performed category of beings or a possession that one can have. Gender does not pertain more to women than to men. Gender is the relationship between variously constituted categories of men and women (and variously arrayed tropes), differentiated by nation, generation, class, lineage, color, and much else." (Haraway, Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium, 28) By this description she positions gender as a post-discursive concept that is constructed by its interaction with other identity categories. She seems to suggest, by saying that gender is not a performed category, that the individual does not choose a gender but develops in response to his/her circumstances. By an extension of this argument, Haraway seems to hypothesise a model of identity that is not self-consciously constructed but unconsciously developed. This does not allow the flexibility needed to explain the way in which people interact online. When users craft online identities with different



genders than they have offline, it seems natural to use the word “performance” to discuss their deliberately constructed gendered behaviour.

Harraway’s description of gender is too deterministic and simplistic. It does not account for the way in which cultural and social discourses shape displays and experiences of gender. It also does not account for the interaction between the concepts of sex and gender that are necessary to explain gendered behaviour. Most importantly, by conceptualising gender as another category with class and nation, Harraway hides the body through which the gender exists.

I find conceptualising gender as performative a more useful and complex way of understanding the way gender interacts with identity and representations. In “Breaking out of Binaries: Reconceptualizing Gender and its Relationship to Language in Computer-Mediated Communication” Michelle Rodino says: “By viewing gender not as a stable quality but as something that exists only in the works of its production, one can more fully represent the many ways in which gender is experienced and exhibited.” (<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue3/rodino.html>)

Butler’s belief that gender is performance also frees it from sex. She does not separate gender from discourse but argues that gender only exists as it is being performed. This implies that gender does not have to be an expression of sex but can be constructed separately. Conceptualising gender as performance does not isolate it from the body as the performance still originates from an embodied subject. It also liberates the analysis of gender from the binary categories in which it was previously theorised. Rodino says: “Reconceptualizing gender as performative helps researchers break out of binary categories that have bound past research. Conceiving of gender as under constant construction also helps demystify and thus disrupt the binary gender system which naturalizes patriarchy.” (<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue3/rodino.html>)

Seeing gender as performance helps to articulate the way in which online identities are constructed, perceived and displayed. Yet it does not explain the way in which computer users feel the boundaries of their bodies extended by technology. The construction of the cyborg serves to articulate this interaction more coherently.



## Cyborg

The cyborg in its crudest definition is the human body augmented by technology. This implies the existence of a “pre-technological” body that has since been altered by its interaction with “un-natural” technology. The natural body is an ideal construct that will be discussed further in the section on representation. In support of the artificiality that cyborgs are a new cultural phenomenon, Biocca says: “Anyone who believes that there is a ‘natural’ place where the body is not wedded to technology may be embracing both technology and self-deception. Cyborg theorists point out ‘we are already cyborgs.’ We may have been cyborgs for centuries. The cyborg's dilemma is present in our acceptance of the most primitive technologies: in a piece of clothing, in a wrist watch, in a baseball bat, in short, in all technologies that attach themselves and augment the body.” (<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue2/biocca2.html>)

Yet as Haraway points out “ Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Greco 87). Computer technology places the cyborg in a much more prominent position because the computer becomes a valuable prosthesis in new performances of the embodied identity. The computer equipment and software interface become extensions of the body; and the virtual representations (like home-pages) become new ways of representing this body. As we sit in front of our computer terminals our bodies are connected and moving in new ways, although appearing stationary.

To speak of the cyborg refers indirectly to the body prior to its intersection with technology. This implies the concept of the ‘natural’ body. Diane Greco says: “As we learn that bodies are susceptible to technological augmentation and enhancement, we find that the so-called natural body isn't quite so natural, unconstructed, or innocent after all.” (Greco 87) This is relevant to both the understanding of the body and technology, and the nature of postmodern representation. It seems that the ‘natural’ body is an ideal construct that has no real life referent. The signified is indefinite. Yet this construct is consciously and unconsciously used in many discussions of cyberspace and has a very prominent position in the films The Matrix and Johnny Mnemonic.



It is to some extent useful to distinguish between the offline body, located in the chair in front of the computer screen, and the online body or the virtual body. The virtual body is a cyborg of a different kind than imagined by Harraway. Balsamo gives the following detailed description:

The virtual body is neither simply a surface upon which are written the dominant narratives of Western culture, not a representation of cultural ideals of beauty or of sexual desire. It has been transformed into the very medium of cultural expression itself, manipulated, digitalized and technologically constructed in virtual environments. Enhanced visualisation technologies make it difficult to continue to think about the material body as a bounded entity, or to distinguish its inside from its outside, its surface from its depth. ... The structural integrity of the material body as bounded physical object is technologically deconstructed. If we think of the body not as a product, but rather as a process – and of embodiment as an effect – we can begin to ask questions about how the body is staged differently in different realities. (“The Virtual Body in Cyberspace”, The Cybercultures Reader, 497)

The virtual body is a contradiction as it is both liberated from materiality and at the same time a manifestation of the materiality of the body. This contradiction is at the very centre of the construction of online identity. Online identity creates presence through the virtual body, which originates in the materiality of offline body.

#### **4. Representation**

Like identity, “representation” is a word that signals a range of phenomena, and is understood differently by different theorists. Primarily it signifies the visible or external manifestation of an idea or identity. While identities are in continuous flux, representations are usually a static moment in that flux. Unlike identities, they are fixed in time and space. Representation is also closely linked to the concept of text, as text can be seen as isolating moments in space and time. Identity performances can perhaps also be theorised as a series of representations, especially on the Internet where these performances often take the form of text. Representations can take many forms on the Internet, from text to images, and combinations of the two. Representations do not necessarily need to be realistic, the images or text do not need



to be 'true' representations of the subject. Identity faking, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, is also a form of representation.

There is some conflict between the notions of representation and performance. Performance has been described as something in constant flux that expresses or dramatises the ever-changing identity. Performances of identity can perhaps be seen as a continuous stream of representations of the self. The way in which presence is created can also be traced through representations, as suggested above in the notions of "expressions given" and "expressions given off". Both of these expressions take the form of representations of the self. As identity to some extent includes presence, performance and embodiment, representation is closely linked to text in all its forms. But as has been explained in the introduction of this chapter, and as can be seen from the discussion above, all of these concepts are tightly intertwined and separation is to some extent artificial.

Poststructuralist understandings of representation focus strongly on language. There is the belief that nothing exists outside of language and that only language constitutes reality. By placing language in this primary position poststructuralist theorists deny the possibility of anything existing pre-discursively. Identity and any experience of reality must be mediated by language and is hence a consequence of language. This makes the possibility of representing and perceiving reality outside of language impossible and destabilises the notion of "reality".

Representation's close link with language can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure's influential theories of semiology. Semiology is the study of signs and sign systems. The fundamental idea of semiology is that the sign can be categorised into the signifier and the signified, where the signifier refers to the signified, the object. (Saussure) One of the main tasks of semiology is to attempt to analyse and explain the chasm between reality and represented "reality". Saussure proposed that the signs used in representation are arbitrary and that each signifier acquires its meaning from how it differs from others.

Lacan and Derrida critiqued the idea that the sign is anchored to real objects, and they start to destabilise both language and representation with their theories. They draw the



signifier forward and privilege it over the signified. This necessarily destabilises the relationship between reality and the representation thereof, as language is then privileged over reality. Lacan sees an “incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Culler). Derrida’s suggestion is that signifiers are floating and are not anchored to anything outside of language, making a final move away from the representation of an external reality. Because the representation of postmodernism is only in the form of language and does not refer to reality in a direct way, it has been described as flat.

The description of representation as flat appears in many postmodern theories and has powerful implications for an analysis of the Internet and identity. Baudrillard theorises the ‘flatness’ of postmodernism in a different way. He describes the way in which private space has been invaded by images and communication. In The Ecstasy of Communication he states: “All secrets, spaces and scenes are abolished into a single dimension of information.” Baudrillard links the idea of ‘flatness’ with representation by arguing that media representations are without author and simulate reality. In The Precession of the Simulacra he describes how reality has been replaced by the simulacrum (the most complete form of simulation) and that this is the destruction of meaning’s relationship with reality.

In The Postmodernism Reader, Anderson discusses the way Baudrillard compares simulation with representation. He says that representation equates the sign to the real, but: “simulation starts from the utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion, as the death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum.” (Anderson 77)

The idea of the simulacrum will reoccur again and again in this thesis, as online reality is compared with offline reality. Although Baudrillard describes many instances of simulacra in modern media, I will argue that the Internet cannot be confused with other experiences of reality and is not (yet) a simulacrum.



## Self

The representation of the self has been touched on in the discussion above. Lacan describes the loose relationship between the signifier and the signified. He extends this to the representation of the self. Lacan paradoxically states that there is no subject except in representation, but no representation can capture the self. Building on Saussure, and similar to Foucault, Lacan's subject can only be defined in terms of difference, in terms of the Other. Ideal representation is deeply desired but impossible to attain. Differing from Freud, he denies the presence of the body, other than how it is represented through language.

Focussing on difference still references the modern binary oppositions underpinning the definitions of concepts and importantly identity. Butler, in her positioning of the body as constitutive, radically differs from these theories. It will be shown that binary thought does still strongly influence the websites discussed, but often a conscious attempt is made to move and, break the boundaries imposed by binary thought. Haraway, in particular, sees her feminist construct of the cyborg as a way to undermine logocentric thought.

Much of the analysis in this thesis focuses on representations of the self. The email, homepages, and to a lesser extent the web-ring are all self-representations. They are shaped by other websites and emails and are restricted by the technology they can use. This means that they take on forms particular to the Internet. On websites the self is reduced to a two-dimensional format that signifies a whole consciousness. This can be compared to the icon. In religious terms the icon is a picture, often of Madonna and child, which signifies Christian faith. In linguistic terms an icon refers to something that has a characteristic in common with the thing it signifies. The word icon has evolved a computer meaning and refers to the picture on the computer desktop that is a shortcut to a document or a program. The pictures or text, or both, on websites, can represent the offline user in an iconographic way. They are shortcuts that signify more than what they simply represent, and yet there is a 'real' connection with the self they represent.

The representation of the self is channelled and constrained by the computer software used. The interaction between the computer user and the computer software is called



the user-interface, and will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 2 and 3. When a computer user constructs a website they use software to create the html document that is placed on the web-server. There are many different web development applications, some of which require no more skill than word-processing and others for which a programming language has to be learnt. Apart from the varying skill levels required, different programs have limitations in relation to what they can represent. This means that the representations of the self found on the Internet are directly linked to the offline individual's skills and opportunities, and computer technology<sup>1</sup>.

## **5. Text**

This section on text speaks more directly about the theory of the actual "artefacts" that are going to be analysed in the chapters to come. A very broad understanding of text is implied, that includes all sorts of modes of representation, for example writing, film, graphics and animation. The discussion of text addresses a slightly different subject to the discussion of representation. The distinction can be expressed as follows: text is no longer seen as being a depiction of reality, a straightforward representation. It is instead partly representation and partly performance, the creation of presence. For this reason a separate discussion of text is useful.

The way text is composed is also relevant to this discussion and later analyses. I want to return briefly here to Barthes' discussion of intertextuality. In his essay "The Death of the Author" he describes text evocatively as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture." (Barthes 146) With the introduction of the concept of the intertextual, Barthes changes several important things about how text is understood. He explains that the text referred to in intertextual texts are "anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are the quotations without inverted commas." (Barthes 160)

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<sup>1</sup> The combination of the limitations inherent in computer software and hardware strongly contradict the idea that the Internet is a democratic space where all have equal opportunities to represent themselves. These practical elements of Internet representation shape the websites on the Internet and create a social and economic hierarchy among website authors.



This changes the way the text is read. The author as origin can no longer take centre stage; instead the reader needs to re-combine and create the meanings of the text. Barthes describes this as the change from the classical readerly text to the modern writerly text. The writerly text puts the reader in the central position.

It is interesting to note that Derrida constructs a similar concept to intertextuality called 'assemblage'. Landow discusses the way Derrida explains assemblage in "Speech and Phenomena": "The word 'assemblage' seems more apt for suggesting that the kind of bringing-together proposed here has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web, which would allow the different threads and different lines of sense or force to separate again, as well as being ready to bind others together" (<http://landow.stg.brown.edu/cpace/ht/jhup/derrida1.html>)

The concepts of intertextuality and assemblage compliment each other. Where intertextuality places the stress on the tissue of quotations without author, assemblage focuses on the conflicts within text. Assemblage also seems to note the constructed nature of the text, which to some extent brings the writer back into the picture. This is relevant to the analyses of websites, where much attention is paid to the deliberately constructed nature of the websites.

Post-structuralist theories of text have some limitations when applied to email and the webpages discussed in Chapter 2. Where Barthes sees writing as a process of erasing the self and the body, the analyses in Chapter 2 show how these web-texts deliberately include references to the offline body to create presence. However the idea of intertextuality and assemblage can be used very successfully to describe the way Internet texts reference other sources. Hypertext theory is a whole area of research that focuses on the way post-structuralist theory can be seen to materialise in some online texts.

## **Hypertext**

As has been discussed at the beginning of the chapter, hypertext theory is primarily interested in online, usually fictional, text. The hypertext definition of text seems to be narrower than the definition suggested at the beginning of this section, and refers only to text and not to other multimedia found on the Internet. There do not seem to be



hypertext studies that analyse multimedia websites. Hypertext theory is mostly an application of post-structural theory to online texts, and often sees these online texts as a materialisation of these theories. Hypertext theory is not directly relevant to this study, but I have included a brief overview of its main interests here, as it is the only theory currently used to discuss online texts.

Hypertext theory is seen as a writerly text placing the reader in the primary position of meaning-construction. Hypertext is not organised in a linear fashion like texts in offline media such as books. Instead the user makes use of hyperlinks to move from one text to another. This drastically changes the reading process, especially in online novels. Landow describes the decentred nature of online texts as follows:

Hypertext, in other words, provides an infinitely re-centerable system whose provisional point of focus depends upon the reader, who becomes a truly active reader in yet another sense. One of the fundamental characteristics of hypertext is that it is composed of bodies of linked texts that have no primary axis of organization. In other words, the metatext or document set -- the entity that describes what in print technology is the book, work, or single text -- has no centre. (<http://landow.stg.brown.edu/cpace/ht/jhup/decenter.html>)

This has been compared to Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the dialogic, polyphonic, multivocal novel, which he claims "is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (Bakhtin, 18). This can be seen as describing both the multiple authorship of some online texts but also the way in which the reader reads the multiple texts.

It also indirectly refers to the way that hypertext does not have a univocal, authoritarian, voice. The voice of the text is constantly changing as the reader chooses his or her reading path. This also has an effect on the narratives of the text as they are continually changing and need to be constructed by the reader.

Intriguingly, Landow draws parallels between the concept of the cyborg and the hypertext. Hypertext is described as being the "...cyborg paradigm on a textual, narrative level... hypertext shares not only the cyborg insistence on patchwork



subjectivity, a narrative ‘art of making do,’ but also the cyborg resistance to final determination or characterization...”

(<http://landow.stg.brown.edu/cpace/ht/greco4.html>) As will be illustrated in Chapter 2, the political possibilities of multimedia text that invoke the cyborg more directly are even greater.

### **Instability**

One of the main characteristics of Internet texts are their instability. Unlike offline texts that are reproduced in book form that have a relatively long material life, and are often archived for future reference, online texts appear and disappear often without leaving anything more than a few dead links.<sup>2</sup>

There are many possible practical reasons for this. Websites posted on servers that stop working, or are the web-authors close their accounts with the server hosting their sites. Websites need continuous maintenance and authors close them when they no longer have time or interest to keep updating them. Personal homepages, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, need even more maintenance than the average website to remain an up-to-date representation. The web-directories also need to keep changing their lists of active sites and often stop listing a page if it has changed addresses, making the website difficult to find.

The Internet changes continuously, making it an unusually dynamic media. Many of the websites used for this study have significantly changed in the past two years and some have disappeared. This leads to obvious problems for the methodology of Internet study. The websites often simply disappear unexpectedly without a trace, leaving no text to substantiate an analysis. In the past year Internet archives have been started for the first time, but much of the Internet’s first ten years is lost forever.

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<sup>2</sup> Dead links are Internet links that refer to web pages that do not exist.



Another factor complicating old Internet sites is that they very quickly lose compatibility with the browser<sup>3</sup> software used and the conventions of website design. This would imply that some archived sites would eventually not be viewable.

Website content is also unstable. As has been mentioned in the section on identity, the authors of websites and other Internet texts are often unverifiable and this makes the information disseminated unreliable by extension.

### **Narrative**

In the discussions to follow, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, the idea of narrative keeps resurfacing. It is very difficult to discuss or theorise the narrative structure of the Internet, or even persuasively argue that narrative structures exist. The narratives of film are more conventional and can be described more convincingly. This section will trace post-structuralist and postmodern ideas of narrative and discuss how the concept of narrative interacts with identity and discourse.

In The Postmodernism Reader, Anderson suggests that there is currently a rebirth of the narrative. He says: “With the collapse of the universal systems of meaning or meta-narratives, a renarrativization of culture takes place, emphasising communication and the impact of a message upon the audience. There is today an interest in narratives, on the telling of stories... A narrative is not merely a transmission of information. In the very act of telling a story the position of the storyteller and listener, and their place in the social order, is constituted; the story manipulates and creates social bonds.” (Anderson 21)

A narrative implies at least two parties, the sender and the receiver. The person who tells the narrative has an intended meaning that will not be the same as the meaning the listener constructs. This forms a basic gap in all narratives and means that no narrative can ever be complete.

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<sup>3</sup> A browser is a software program that allows the user to download html documents onto their computers while they are connected to their Internet Service Provider (ISP). The browser displays these pages to the user.



This has important implications for identity. Sarup suggests that narrative is an essential part of the construction of identity. It is through telling life stories that the individual constructs himself or herself. Sarup goes on to explain that these narratives are never transparent but are always necessarily to some extent misrepresentative. He says: "Just as an author can arrange incidents in a story in many ways ... a person can, to some extent, arrange the elements, the dynamics, of his or her identity in many different ways. In shaping our identities, much depends on the material resources available... but also the place where the narrative is spoken, the medium used...." (Sarup, 18) This is very significant to the analysis of websites and especially homepages. It will be shown that these web-pages are self-representations that are very powerfully shaped by their location, the computer-interface, and software available.

Linking identity to stories, and particularly autobiography, draws on the tradition of psychotherapy. Sarup makes this point by saying: "Listening to people's biographical narratives is in many ways similar to the work of psychoanalysis. There are, for example, gaps, exclusions and repetitions in the narrative. And the narrative has to be interpreted." (Sarup 16) Comparing the interpretation of autobiography to psychotherapy implies the role of the unconscious in the construction of identity through narrative.

Where the unconscious can be seen as internally constraining and shaping narrative, discourse can be seen to be doing the same thing on a more external, global level. Sarup links theories of narrative to discourse by saying: "Foucault's remarks about discourse also apply to narratives: in any society, the production of the discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised, and redistributed." He goes on to explain: "Each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*) and a discourse (*discourse*)... the story is the 'what' in the narrative, the discursive is the 'how'. The discourse is rather like the plot, how the reader becomes aware of what happened, the order of the appearance of the events." (Sarup 18)

The idea that narrative is constrained and shaped by many different forces is relatively recent. Derrida explains that it was previously believed that speech, and hence narrative, was a direct out-pouring of the self. The study of narratology contradicts



and undermines this notion of privileged presence through speech, by suggesting a finite set of rules and systematic features governing all narratives. These ideas were to some extent a development of Levi-Strauss's studies of mythology, in which all narratives shared basic patterns. The idea of continuously recurring basic narratives is discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to the plots of Hackers and You've Got Mail.

John McDaid in "Narrative in the Information Society" discusses several characteristics of contemporary narratives. He describes a nostalgia for linear narratives that manifest themselves in films with simple linear plots and computer games also designed on a linear narrative structure. The fragmentation of postmodern narratives also presents itself in science fiction stories about alternative histories, like X-Files and The Matrix that will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The narratives in film are in contrast to the conflicting and multiple narratives found on the Internet. Homepages are the simplest websites to discuss in terms of narrative, as many pages contain a text autobiography. But, as will be shown in Chapter 2, this is not always the case and is perhaps becoming more and more rare. Instead, the representations of the self are in multiple media and the narratives are fragmented and intertextual. I will attempt to demonstrate in Chapter 2 that the multimedia Internet does have a narrative structure and that this is an important part of how websites are read.

This chapter has explored some of the meanings of the interactions between identity, presence, performance, the body, representation and text. As all of these concepts carry multiple meanings it has been necessary to move relatively quickly through several elements of structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodern theory to indicate the many dimensions of these concepts. In the analysis that will follow in Chapter 2, it will be shown how these concepts can be applied Internet media, particularly websites.



## Chapter 2: Reading the Internet

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The Internet is a relatively recent media having only taken its current form in the early nineties. The concept of inter-linked computers facilitating communication and data sharing started to take shape in a few computer programmers' minds in the nineteen fifties. For many years, the idea of the personal computer and computer networks belonged to the realm of science fiction, as the computers of the fifties and sixties filled warehouses and were operated through punch cards.

The first thrust towards making the Internet a reality came when the former Soviet Union launched Sputnik. This prompted the American government to pump funding into the development of computers that functioned as personal thinking aids, and interconnecting these computers. Although funded by the American government the personal computer (pc) and Internet were developed by subcultures of computer programmers. These early hackers, believed that computer technology should be cheap and useable by all.

The current non-hierarchical, non-linear structure of the Internet is also a consequence of its military origin. The Internet was a result of moving away from a mainframe computer that contained all the information to a network of smaller computers through which the information could travel in small packages, to be reassembled at any destination. This meant that several computers could be destroyed by military strikes without compromising the network.

The Internet very quickly spread to academic institutions and email was developed. As more people became computer users the development of pc's accelerated, and they became available commercially in the late seventies and early eighties. The connection of these computers to telephone lines through modems followed soon after.

This chapter intends to show how the latest stage of this development of computer-mediated communication is affecting popular culture and the way we understand



ourselves. Since the mid nineties, the Internet has transformed into a mainly web-page format, written in hypertext mark-up language (html), and viewed through web-browser software, like Microsoft's Internet Explorer. The chapter will examine several common Internet media, but will focus on web-pages, as they are seen as the main mode of Internet representation.

In Chapter 1 it was suggested that identity is established through a series of performances and that this creates a virtual presence essential to an online identity. This chapter aims to show how this virtual presence is established and how it is linked to offline life. Moreover, as I showed above, the body is closely linked to identity. This chapter demonstrates that the offline body often insinuates itself into online discourses, indicating the importance of the material body in the virtual world. How does this body influence the construction of online embodiment and presence? How do the Internet representations interact with offline life? The chapter also investigates how the online texts interact with each other, and a theory of Internet narrative is suggested.

One of the main characteristics of online identity that will be further explored in this chapter is its instability. The online identities represented are often unverifiable and can perform multiple misrepresentations, as is demonstrated in the following section on email.

### **Email: Absence or Presence**

Email has become an essential part of most computer users' lives. Not only has email done away with much snail mail and telephone communication, it also functions as a vehicle for online activity. This section intends to explore the way in which email is used to facilitate online presence and construct identity. I will also question how email and email addresses can be used to represent and misrepresent the user.

Most email users use the medium of email in a stable and predictable way. They do not attempt to conceal their offline identity, as their email address is an extension of their offline life. They use email to communicate with professional and private contacts, most of whom they know offline. This section is particularly interested in



the moments when these assumptions are not true and email is a not a stable reflection of offline identity.

### **Identity and Presence**

Identity is fundamental to our understanding of reality and is at the heart of most philosophical theory, even if not overtly discussed. In this section, I will build on the postmodern theories of identity suggested in Chapter 1. A prominent characteristic of a postmodern understanding of identity is the belief that identity is constructed. This process of construction is constantly changing and is a product of interaction between the individual, others, and situations. In terms of the Internet and email, the user constructs their identity in response to other users and the software they are using, and the cultural representations of online identity. The expression of this identity is limited by the opportunities for representation in the mostly textual environment of email.

If we see representation as the performance of identity, then it is a practice that is never completed. As Madan Sarup writes: "...identities are fabricated. They are never finished products. Identities are stitched together out of discontinuous forms and practices. The representation of identity is an ongoing process, undertaken on many levels, in different practices and sites of experience. Identity is articulated in multiple modalities – the moment of experience, the mode of writing or representation (for example in fiction or film) and the theoretical modality." (Sarup 40)

As users write email, they perform their identity. This performance occurs at the moment of writing and is the performance that creates online presence. Jacques Derrida argues that speech conveys the presence of the speaker more powerfully than writing, where the presence of the author is somewhat deferred, but sees presence as a problematic term. He argues that speech is privileged over writing. This idea can be applied to email, where the style of writing has more elements in common with speech than other writing, perhaps to make it more effectual in establishing online presence, as will be explored later in this section.

On the Internet, the full, embodied presence of the user is always deferred, as users physically exist in their homes or offices, behind the computer screen, and the



medium of email is asynchronous. For this reason the user is essentially always partly absent online. Yet, online representation is still a performance of the user's identity. The question then becomes: Who, how and what is present and absent? The user's body remains anchored in front of the computer screen but in the simulated online environment the user can represent him/herself in anyway. Baudrillard seems to imply that this simulation can be as real as offline reality, but this view can be contradicted by other theories of gender and culture.<sup>1</sup>

These and other opposing ideas about embodiment and reality dramatise a large part of the postmodern debate. A variation of these arguments is evident in postmodernism's interest in identity. This is manifested positively in the interest in multiple contradictory perspectives, and more negatively in Jameson's notion of schizophrenia. A lot of the postmodern debate about identity can be described in terms of contradictions and gaps as it describes identity as fragmented and contradictory, instead of whole and unified. It seems that the sense of presence is necessarily defined by its absences. The conflict between presence and absence in online identity will be illustrated here through the use of email.

## **Email**

Email has become a central tool in online communication. Where formerly the Internet consisted of only the military and academic ARPA-net using only email and newsgroups, it now consists of multiple communications media mostly using an http format. This development has put email in a more central position, as the older text-based interfaces have merged into the Internet. The consequence has been a development from a paper-free mailing service for American military and academics, to an international form of communication, identity verification and self-expression.

It is important to realise that the conception of email as merely a different way of sending letters is inaccurate. The form of email differs from snailmail letters in several important ways. Email register and style is informal and has its own specific conventions. The writing is also more like speech causing it to be described as 'text-speech'. John December, in his research article "Characteristics of Oral Culture in

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<sup>1</sup> These theories are described in greater detail in Chapter 1, in which the body is placed in a prominent position.



Discourse on the Net”, describes online discourse as emotive, expressive and participatory, much like oral discourse. The use of emoticons<sup>2</sup>, abbreviations like LOL for laugh out loud, and spelling and grammatical variations, also adds further dimensions of informal expression to email texts.

Email communication is, like speech, an unstable medium. It is rarely recorded as most users read-reply-delete. I will argue that this ‘text-speech’ quality is an important element in creating online presence, and thereby establishing online identity. This is an expansion of Derrida’s idea that speech has a greater quality of presence than writing.

The use of email as a verification tool is also relevant to an understanding of online identity. When a user logs on to a network or an Internet Service Provider (ISP), verification is required. This verification includes a name and password that identifies the terminal and the user. From this point onwards the user can be watched and is ‘visible’ – another element of presence. This process is also increasingly required at web pages and web-rings. In these online forums the user needs to become a member to enter these online areas. The member’s identity is verified by the user’s valid email address. Similarly, in chat rooms and Multiple User Domains (MUDs<sup>3</sup>), the user’s email address serves as the stable identifying factor. The process of verification makes the user observable and causes the email address to become an important aspect of online identity. It is of course equally possible for the user to use multiple email addresses for different online activities, destabilising this process of verification and the accompanying assumptions about identity.

The use of different email addresses is also possible in ordinary email communication. The user can use separate email addresses to communicate with different people and could make use of fake reply addresses to send spam<sup>4</sup> or flames<sup>5</sup>. The user can also make use of email bots<sup>6</sup>, allowing routine responses to be sent by a machine using the email address. The resulting email may be indistinguishable from a

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<sup>2</sup> An emoticon is a combination of punctuation marks used to represent a facial expression. The smiley “:)” is the most common example of this.

<sup>4</sup> Spam refers to unsolicited direct marketing email, often subscribing a user to an advertising service.

<sup>5</sup> Flames are aggressive emails usually using an ad hominem argument.

<sup>6</sup> Bots are small programs doing repetitive tasks.



user-authored response, allowing (artificial intelligence) software to misrepresent the user and become a Baudrillardian simulation indistinguishable from the real. This represents another significant moment of destabilisation of any assumptions made about presence or online identity. This too can cause email to be seen as an unreliable form of self-presentation or performance.

### **Email Addresses**

A full email address has the format of a name, followed by the “@” sign, a company, organisation, or ISP name, and often ends in a country abbreviation, indicating a geographic location. This full address is visible on an email, if it is not deliberately concealed or altered. As an email program downloads messages, this is the first information available to the recipient, other than the subject line, and is read and possibly recognised by the recipient. As the syntax of email is relatively standardised much information about the social and geographical status of the sender can be concluded. The idea that the syntax is standard and the representation is true creates the impression of the stable presence of the writer.

The changing environment of the Internet challenges these assumptions. Unlike early email users, most people now have multiple email addresses. Several reasons for this can be postulated: as the commercial sector has become aware of the potential of email for direct marketing, many users have been inundated with spam. This invasion of privacy has caused many to make use of multiple email address. It is common to use a web-based email provider like Yahoo or Hotmail to move around in public spaces. This is because there are many bot-programs roaming in chat-rooms and web-rings, listening and gathering email addresses for spammers. The web-based address gives the user greater anonymity as the name is personally chosen and no social or geographic information is provided by the address. A further advantage of web-based email addresses is that they are free and can easily be abandoned if too frequently spammed or approached by undesirable contacts. Their international accessibility and anonymity also allow disenfranchised users to log in from Internet cafés or public access machines, concealing their status or location.

Web-based email addresses are common forms of misrepresentation. Remailers and fakemailers are more sinister forms of misrepresentation. These will be discussed



shortly. Perhaps the most sinister form of misrepresentation are Trojan horse viruses, as recently experienced with the “Love Bug” (Grossman, Time). Such viruses seem to come from friends or contacts, tricking the recipient into opening them and thereby activating the virus. This misuse of email undermines the common assumptions made about online identity and shows how online writing is not transparent, as there is always the possibility of faking.

### **Nicks and Names**

Although email addresses in their totality can be said to represent the online user, it is specifically the name section preceding the “@” sign that serves as the main identifier. These names are usually chosen by the user, and are one of the few opportunities for people to choose their own identifiers. In “FROM <Bonehead> TO <cLoNehEAd>” Haya Bechar-Israeli discusses the significance of self-chosen names saying that “a name chosen by a person is more strongly linked to his or her identity than the name chosen for him or her by another person.”

This is also the case in MUDs and chats where users create a character with a “nick”. These users will usually have a corresponding email address where their nicks are their names. Bechar-Israeli did a study investigating the choice of nicks in Internet Relay Chat (IRC<sup>7</sup>), and found that nicks could be categorised into the following main groups in order of popularity: self-related names; names related to the media, technology and their nature; names of flora, fauna and objects; plays on words and sounds; offline names and names relating to fictional characters and famous people (Bechar-Israeli, FROM <Bonehead> TO <cLoNehEAd>). This once again illustrates the strong link between self-chosen names and the identity the users perform through them. It would be interesting if a similar study could be done on email names. Because email is often used in a professional capacity, there would presumably be a larger number of users using their own names, but possibly also privately creating different online identities.

It has been shown that the choice of email names can also break down gender barriers via the deliberate choice of “sex non-specific” return addresses (Herring, Johnson,

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<sup>7</sup> Internet Relay Chat



and DiBenedetto 198). By choosing to conceal or misrepresent their gender, a user can further influence their representation. This kind of misrepresentation is made possible by the text interface of email, concealing the gender of the offline body.

It could be postulated that these choices of new names and even genders are part of the active construction of identity theorised by postmodern writers. Through the creation of an online persona, the user is writing an identity into the web. This identity will then influence the construction and performance of other identities. Therefore, through writing a representation the user creates a sense of an online identity existing, being present. As with full email addresses there is the possibility for the creation of multiple identities that can all be performances of aspects of the complex, contradictory and dynamic offline identity. However even this assumption of an a priori offline identity is questionable and based on the idea that an embodied identity is privileged because it appears to be more present.

### **Remailers**

The stability of online identity, represented by an email address, is further complicated and undermined by the use of software programs called remailers. These programs, often accessed through a web site, allow a user to send an untraceable email. Usually the sender's address, as well as the route travelled by an email is easily visible to the recipient. This means that even if the sender enters a different or fake reply address, the recipient can trace the original email account. With the use of remailing software, the send-address is deleted and the real route cannot be tracked. This allows the user to conceal his or her address, and hence identity, and possibly substitute another address and identity. This allows users to impersonate others in public forums. An interesting example of this happened in a Courtney Love fan newsgroup, where an impostor was judged to be Courtney and the real Courtney was judged to be a fake. ([alt.fan.courtney-love](http://alt.fan.courtney-love) and [www.nirvanaclub.com/grant15.htm](http://www.nirvanaclub.com/grant15.htm))

### **Fakemailers**

A variation on remailers is available at a site called [www.RubberChicken.com](http://www.RubberChicken.com). At this site it is possible to send snailmail letters to individuals from a fake source. The Fakemail service claims that it can send a variety of convincing fake letters purporting to come from government offices such as the American Internal Revenue



Service. This site seems to be an opportunity for practical jokes, or at worst an opportunity for revenge. However, the importance of this kind of site is that it illustrates how the instability of email is affecting the more traditional paper letter medium.

### **You've Got Mail**

Given that in 1998 "70 percent of the world's population [had] never made a telephone call" (Hayles 20), the influence of computer-mediated communication is remarkably widespread. This is because of the frequent depiction of electronic media in widely watched films, television programs and advertisements.

The popular film You've Got Mail is a good example of a mainstream representation of the medium of email and chatting. The film is a love story between the manager of a large chain of bookshops and the owner of a small children's corner bookshop. This unlikely couple meet on the Internet before they meet in real life and continue to correspond via email, not knowing each other's true identity. The chain forces the small shop out of business, causing animosity between the characters. In offline life they dislike each other, but online they fall in love.

In the end, this film appears to uncritically perpetuate the idea of a stable identity conveyed through a stable medium. It initially pretends to examine some of the instabilities of email by questioning whether a user can like and fall in love with someone online, and then dislike him or her in real life. It pretends to question whether the users can have contradictory identities.

David Jacobson, in his article "Impression Formation in Cyberspace" suggests that readers form inaccurate impressions about other users' offline identities. He suggests that this is due to the way in which the reader is influenced by other information in his or her cognitive framework. The different responses between the online and offline characters or personas would then be due to the different cognitive assumptions of the characters in the different mediums.

Yet, You've Got Mail never truly examines the issue of contradictory online and offline representations of identity. Instead, it uses email and chatting to set up a



stereotypical love/hate plot. The online representations are gradually shown to be representative of the users' true identity, usually confined by offline power positions. Instead of examining the effect of the media used, an analogy is drawn to Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice". The book is mentioned and displayed, indicating that this story is also about initial assumptions that prove wrong.

The emails written are very letter-like and representation of the media is conservative, as it does not reflect the creative and performative style characteristic of chat-initiated email. The domestication of the computer by the use of laptops, in bed and in luxurious apartments, adds to the impression of an 'old-fashioned' love story, jazzed up with trendy commodities and big companies. This is a powerful example of how film misrepresents Internet media, for the purposes of their narratives.

In the film there are contradictory perceptions of email as either simply representative or essentially misleading. This is based on the questionable belief that an online response is not complete because it is not embodied and hence not fully present. Email communication, because of its text-speech style, has a greater potential for the performance of identity than other offline writing. At the same time, it offers many opportunities for deception. From a utopian perspective, this grants the user the opportunities to construct and manifest any number of identities, emancipated from offline restrictions. It also, however, essentially creates an unstable medium in which all representations are characterised by the absence of offline verification. These moments of silence and insecurity, fantasy and creativity are truly expressive of postmodern identity.

### **Lists, MUDs and MOOs, and Chats**

This section is intended to be a brief introduction to the other media that are frequently used on the Internet. Unlike the section on email and the sections on web-pages, there will be no detailed analysis of these media. The reason for this is that these are less frequently represented in the media and unlike email and web-pages, have been frequently analysed. These studies usually focus around a sense of community, but identity and self-representation have also been discussed. A brief



overview of these media will be given and it will be shown that they are all moving towards integration into web-pages.

These media were developed shortly after the Internet developed from the military ARPA-net and are second to email, the oldest online medium. It is for this reason that much earlier research was focused on them. Lists, MUDs and MOOs, and chats are all text-only interfaces. In all of these media, the text interface has been pushed to its limits to appear more three-dimensional. In chats and lists, emoticons are used to express users' emotions and indicate the tone of the text. In MUDs and MOOs the alphabetical and numerical symbols have been used to represent a two-dimensional environment in which the users interface with text command lines.

The reason for the use of text over a more graphical user interface in these media is simple. It had not been developed yet. The early computer's hardware could only support a text command line interface. These early developments arose from the desire to take advantage of interconnected computers for entertainment. The purpose of MUDs, MOOs and chats are mostly entertainment, based on the interaction with real people in contrast to the computer games that were only an interaction with machines. Lists were not only for entertainment, but also for the dissemination of information and collaboration with colleagues. What follows is primarily a historical and factual description of these media, starting with lists. Lists are actually not much more than a development of email technology. A list is a group of users who all receive the email sent to the list, and can respond to this email by writing back to the group. Lists are topic specific and users need to join them to be able to receive email sent to the list. The lists are handled by a computer called a list-server and administered by their authors or senior list members. Some lists allow all posting to immediately be sent to all members, but many lists are moderated. This means that specific appointed members would first censor the material before sending it on to the whole list. This is usually done to make sure that the posting is "on topic" and that it does not contain inappropriate language or references.

Nothing is done to verify the user's offline identity or credentials and this raises all the problems of faking discussed in the section on email. In fact, it is interesting to see that list members will frequently discuss and attempt to verify suspicious claims to



identity by other members and that this is a regular topic for conversation. The interactions on lists follow a discussion format called a thread. A member will post an email to the list. Other members who comment on this email have the same subject line, preceded by "Re:" as with normal emails. As the emails are organised by date, all the emails are organised in a linear fashion by topic and this phenomenon is called a thread. Usually a few threads will be discussed simultaneously.

Lists are, like email, asynchronous. This leads to a style very similar to ordinary email. The main difference between lists and ordinary email is the group dynamics that form through the interaction of group members. This has been frequently analysed and researched. The most famous example of list research can be found in Howard Rheingold's discussions of the Well list, in his book The Virtual Community. This, like almost all of list and early Internet research, focussed around the idea of a sense of community.

Researchers were drawing parallels between online interactions found on lists and the interactions between members of an offline community. A great excitement and enthusiasm characterised these early studies and there was a strong hope that the Internet could and would provide all and more benefits of offline communities. These early studies and commentaries<sup>8</sup> have since received criticism for their utopian analyses. Although lists can foster interactions similar to those of offline communities there are many important differences. They are based on asynchronous text communication. The presence and identities of the members are mediated through email software and text. Their claims to offline bodies and locations are unverifiable and can be faked.

Lists are still important ways for people with similar interests to collaborate and share information. Archives of lists are stored on web-pages, making them less ephemeral than they once were. Lists of lists are also available on the Internet, providing information on how to subscribe. This makes them less exclusive as they no longer are known only of by word of mouth and as people increasingly have access to an email address and can subscribe to lists.

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<sup>8</sup> Howard Rheingold's opinions are a good example of this.



MUDs and MOOs are a development of computer technology quite separate from email. MUD is an acronym for a Multiple User Dungeon and a MOO is an object orientated MUD. These programs are very different from email programs or Internet browsers. They often use object orientated programming language to create a world that contains objects with properties. According to Canton Becker a MOO is "...just a programming language in which you design objects. Everything is an object. Rooms are objects, exits are objects, possessions are objects, even your MOO alter-ego/avatar is an object." ([http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,,sid9\\_gci212589,00.html](http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,,sid9_gci212589,00.html)) These objects are placed in an environment made up of objects like rooms, walls, and doors that again have predefined properties. The environment is traditionally a house with a garden. The users have to define themselves through certain characteristics and are able to interact with other users and objects.

It needs to be remembered that all of these interactions occur through text. The users are described in text descriptions. They move through the MUD world by typing commands and "see" the world through the descriptions that appear in response to the commands. A map is available at most MUDs and MOOs and sometimes the users move through a two-dimensional representation of the environment represented by alphanumeric symbols.

Some of these MUDs and MOOs are based around role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons. Others are based on quest-style games. Many MUDs and MOOs are primarily about socialising. One of the first things you need to do when joining a MOO is to create an online identity. Rheingold says:

You have to decide the name of your alternate identity--what MUDDers call your character. And you have to describe who this character is, for the benefit of the other people who inhabit the same MUD. By creating your identity, you help create a world. Your character's role and the roles of the others who play with you are part of the architecture of belief that upholds for everybody in the MUD the illusion of being a wizard in a castle or a navigator aboard a starship: the roles give people new stages on which to exercise new identities, and their new identities affirm the reality of the scenario. (<http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/5.html>)



As can be seen from this description, MUDs and MOOs have a strong dramatic quality. The text takes the form of lyrical description that are interspersed by “characters” acting out their parts. “Narrative is the stuff of which MUDworlds are made. Everyone and everything and every place has a story. Every object in a MUD, from your character's identity to the chair your character is sitting in, has a written description that is revealed when you choose to look at the object” (<http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/5.html>)

As these identities are carefully and deliberately crafted, they could in the future be fruitfully analysed and compared to other versions of online representation. Gender is an important aspect of this “character”. Gender-faking is another frequently discussed topic in terms of MUDs and MOOs. Pavel offers this explanation for the frequency of gender switching in early MUD communities: “It appears that the great majority of players are male and the vast majority of them choose to present themselves as such. Some males, however, taking advantages of the relative rarity of females in MUDs, present themselves as female and thus stand out to some degree.... This is such a widely-noticed phenomenon, in fact, that one is advised by the common wisdom to assume that any flirtatious female-presenting players are, in real life, males. Such players are often subject to ostracism based on this assumption.” (<http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/5.html>)

This type of gender posturing is also a common characteristic of chats. Chats can take many forms and keep developing as the Internet develops. Chats can be defined as: “...talking to other people who are using the Internet at the same time you are. Usually, this “talking” is the exchange of typed-in messages requiring one site as the repository for the messages (or “chat site”) and a group of users who take part from anywhere on the Internet. In some cases, a private chat can be arranged between two parties who meet initially in a group chat.”

([http://searchwebmanagement.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid27\\_gci211777,00.htm](http://searchwebmanagement.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid27_gci211777,00.htm))

The important difference between chats and MUDs that often contain chats, and email and lists, is that they are time synchronous. As all the users are connected through the Internet, they can communicate close to the speed of a real time conversation. The Internet connection is not equally fast for all users, due to their



different physical locations. This can cause a delay between the typed responses sent by the chat participants. This delay is known as lag. Lag is a common topic in chats indicating the importance of this disruption. It draws attention to the mediated nature of chats, and the limits of the technology that make it more difficult to have a “real” conversation.

As discussed in the email section, chat users also create online identities or nicks and often have email addresses associated with these nicks. Chats are mediated by various different software applications. Originally, chats were conducted through a telnet application<sup>9</sup> like MUDs and MOOs. This way of interconnecting computers predates web-browsers. Since then most chat programs have migrated to the web, and have a more graphic user interface although the chat is still conducted through text. Many web sites, particularly web-directories, offer chat sites where users can log in and chat to a room full of other users, send private messages to a user or move to a smaller private chat room.

A software application like Internet Relay Chat (known as IRC) does not rely on the web to chat. It uses a program in some ways similar to Telnet to connect users to “rooms” centring on specific topics, called channels. IRC has a strong following and specific sub-cultures have developed amongst IRC users. They share some characteristics with MUD cultures and have a super-status, called “wizard”, who can control and ban users. Other newer chat applications are AOL Buddy, now bundled<sup>10</sup> with Netscape Communicator, and MSN messenger, bundled with Internet Explorer and Hotmail. They are, in comparison to IRC, very easy to use and are for this reason much more accessible to the average Internet user. They rely strongly on a graphic user interface, allowing users to click on contacts in their lists to initiate a conversation with them. The contact’s online or offline status is indicated by an icon next to the contact’s name, which lights up when the contact is online. These programs are mostly used for one-to-one chats, although conference chatting is possible. Members usually only chat to people they know and have specifically added

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<sup>9</sup> “Telnet is the way you can access someone else's computer, assuming they have given you permission. (Such a computer is frequently called a host computer.) More technically, Telnet is a user command and an underlying TCP/IP protocol for accessing remote computers.”

[http://searchnetworking.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid7\\_gci213116,00.html](http://searchnetworking.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid7_gci213116,00.html)

<sup>10</sup> When software is bundled it means that it is included with larger applications and automatically downloaded with those applications. It is hence often not specifically chosen by the user.



to their contact list. ICQ is another chat program similar to AOL and MSN, and users can enter rooms to converse with strangers and can also be contacted by people not on their list. In this way, ICQ combines some of the features of web-chats with those of private chat applications.

As the average Internet user purchases more sophisticated computers and has faster connections to the Internet, a new communications phenomena is emerging. Chats are moving away from their text interface and to a more graphical representation of users than mere nicks. Some of these chat programs replace text with voice or video streaming but most rather change the text environment, allowing users to create visual representations of themselves called avatars. This can take the form of a photograph, a cartoon character, or any other graphic the user wants to create. The rooms are also graphical spaces, designed to simulate “real” world meeting places like a bar or a common room.

Today, many MUDs can be accessed through a Web site and are merging with the above-described chat environments. These new spaces are known as 3-D worlds. As this technology matures it becomes increasingly dependant on web interfaces as browser software is already installed on most computers and is most convenient and accessible to users. This will cause all these originally diverse media to increasingly merge and be limited by web-page formats.

## **Webpages**

Surfing from link to link across the World Wide Web is an activity engaged in by an increasingly diverse set of people and has more recently become a more inviting place for women as more women claim their sites in cyberspace<sup>11</sup>. It is now possible for people to navigate their way through cyberspace bombarded by pictures, sound and text to get information, to be entertained, to join a community and construct their identity through their interaction with people and sites. There are perhaps still many other reasons for interacting with the Internet not yet understood.

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<sup>11</sup> As discussed in the introduction, the Internet used to be a very closed and male community due to its history as a military tool and its technically elitist interface.



The history of the Internet has been discussed briefly in the beginning of this chapter, but significant to this section is the relatively recent development of the computer networks from command line<sup>12</sup> interface to the widely accessible Internet with a graphic user interface<sup>13</sup>. As this interface has become increasingly accessible, the number of users have increased and changed. Consequently, as the computer became a public and domestic tool, greater changes in the Internet and its interface has been required and prompted by users. Currently, the main interface to the Internet is through the medium of web-pages. These web-pages are documents stored in the html format and are located on millions of servers<sup>14</sup> around the globe. The information these pages contain is called up to the user's local server by typing in the page's address or clicking on a link that represents that address.

Most metaphors for accessing the Internet refer to spatial movement of the user to a new location. Most common is the metaphor of "surfing the net". This is descriptive of the decentralised way in which knowledge is accessed on the Internet. There is no central cataloguing system. Information is accessed through keywords that are pursued along many parallel substructures in directories of websites. Another common nautical metaphor is that of navigation. The Internet browser, Netscape Navigator, introduced this idea to the conceptual framework of Internet access. The prefix "cyber" originates from the Greek word for steersman, indicating an underlying nautical metaphor. Microsoft's Internet Explorer also offers to guide you through your exploration of the Internet, once again part of the spatial representation of the World Wide Web. The media uses phrases like the "information superhighway", drawing a further metaphoric analogy between information access and embodied spatial travel. I suggest that this metaphor is part of the way in which computer users import their offline understanding of reality on to the computer.

In postmodern media forms in particular, the mode of representation is foregrounded. Postmodernism is characterised by a self-aware interest in the new opportunities for representation and a continuous reworking of existing representations. This can be

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<sup>12</sup> Command line refers to the typing of a series of commands in text versus, for example, clicking on icons.

<sup>13</sup> A computer interface is the way in which information is displayed to, and manipulated by, the computer user. It also refers to the layout of the screen.

<sup>14</sup> A server is a computer linked to a network by a cable or telephone line. It can store html files that can be requested by users.



seen in the modes of representation that are used. Self-conscious intertextuality, bricolage<sup>15</sup> and play, that will be shown to be characteristics of websites, make the Internet an interesting model for postmodern representation, extending the concept of representation and even postmodernism.

The conceptual frameworks influencing the way in which the Internet is represented reveal some of the complexities of this medium. As previously mentioned, there are frequent references to the spatial nature of the Internet. Conceptualising the Internet as undiscovered territory to be navigated, or as the new frontier, imports offline ideas of exploration. These metaphors indicate the desire to inhabit and own the Internet. An example of this is the purchase of domain names.<sup>16</sup> The media frequently use the metaphor of the Internet as a frontier, characterised by staking claims and lawlessness, perhaps invoking the ideas of colonisation.

Although the spatial metaphors of the media are popular and suggestive, temporal metaphors also reflect offline fantasies. Users desire “instantaneous” access to information, as is reflected by frequent complaints about slow connections in any chat-room or Internet-related discussion. The emphasis on the speed of access to information, measured in bytes per second, represents the user’s connectivity. If a user has real-time<sup>17</sup> access to information, the temporal requirements of reality are met and the online experience feels more “real” and more like an offline experience of time, and is hence closer to a simulacrum. (Baudrillard) This is because the artificial medium of computer-mediated communication is then less obvious and intrusive.

The spatial representations employed on the Internet, and the metaphors which accompany them, emphasise the transformation from the previously text-based Internet to the graphical user interface (GUI) of html documents. The increasing presence of visual images and hypertext ‘clickable’ links further provides a more convincing alternative reality than straight text information. They appeal to more senses and are for this reason more “immersive”. The multimedia nature of many web-pages allows a greater scope for representation, and a mode of representation that

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<sup>15</sup> Bricolage is an extreme form of collage to be discussed a little later in this section.

<sup>16</sup> An example of a personalised domain name takes the form of [www.yourname.com](http://www.yourname.com).

<sup>17</sup> Real-time access refers to a transfer of information without delay.



has more spatial characteristics in common with offline reality. Theorising Internet representation hence challenges and extends conventional postmodern text-based configurations, and the way that we understand the 'real'.

The characteristics, nature, and limitations of web-pages and browser software also strongly influence the way in which they can represent Internet users and how these representations are perceived. An analysis of web-representations not only reflects the technology of the Internet and the characteristics of postmodern representation, but also current ideas about identity.

As has been discussed in Chapter 1, contemporary critical theory holds complex, and often contradictory, views about identity. New technological media create ways to construct and represent identity. In this section, as in the section on email, the performative nature of identity will be discussed. I will look at several different kinds of web-pages that represent users' identities in different ways. I will start with personal homepages and argue that they are a fundamental way of establishing online identity, but that this identity is often closely linked with the user's conception of his or her offline identity. I will then analyse a web-ring, arguing that this media form starts to allow a development of a group identity that moves away from offline representations and exploits the possibilities of the web-medium. This will be followed by an analysis of representations of online identities that do not have an offline counterpart.

What I am interested in exploring here is the embodiment of cyber-identities. This section starts with an analysis of homepages, where representations are closely linked to their offline-embodied authors, moves to more ambiguous examples of embodiment on web-rings and finally to representations of authorless cyber-bodied identities. Notions of embodiment are fundamental to these constructions and representations of identity. In chapter 1 the relationship between identity, representations and embodiment were discussed, and this will be applied and demonstrated in this section in regard to web-pages. A discussion of identity and embodiment would not be possible without the discussion of gender. Below, I analyse and extend debates around embodiment and its relationship to feminism, given the new context of the Internet.



## **Embodiment**

Science fiction and cyberpunk authors have popularised the fantasy of removing the essential information of a person from their physical body, and this is referred to as “uploading”. This information would be free from the limitations of embodied reality and could be uploaded into an alternative world made up only of data. The idea of uploading the mind into the machine has also been pursued by scientists and philosophers, most famously by Dr. Moravec, in the concept of the Moravec transfer. Whether this fantasy is expressed through fiction or philosophy, it is still representative of the need to escape the vulnerabilities and restrictions of the human body. It also expresses the desire to create, control and manipulate cyber-identity.

Such fantasies are not limited to cyberpunk fiction. Some utopian postmodern writers believe that postmodernism will also facilitate this kind of escape. They write about the possibility of constructing identity separate from the material body, and escaping from metanarratives. Some feminist theorists see the possibilities for the construction and performance of gender identity outside of limiting patriarchal culture.

The Internet is a flexible medium that can be seen as a new playground for expression. This section will question whether the Internet facilitates the kind of liberating performances of identity envisioned by science fiction and postmodern theory. Web-pages have their own technological and aesthetic limits and it will be questioned whether these are sometimes overlooked in a desire for cyber-embodiment and the freedom associated with it. As cyberspace does not exist in isolation, it is interesting to speculate on how the Internet representations compete with or compliment offline embodiment. It will be questioned whether the Internet, particularly in the form of websites, can offer an alternative space for the representation and performance of identity, and how this space facilitates embodiment and the simulation of embodiment. Does it offer a partial fulfilment of the liberating fantasies hoped for as a result of modern technology?

Baudrillard, in “Precession of the Simulacra”, describes a postmodern confusion between the real and simulations of the real. He argues that this is due to a fundamental change in representation. Baudrillard suggests that “representation stems



from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real.... Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.” (Baudrillard 6) This is relevant to our understanding of the Internet and particularly how online identities are understood. The online identities are representations of the offline self, but are also something new and independent with their own characteristics. Baudrillard suggests that the relationship between the signifier and the signifiers is disrupted. “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.” (Baudrillard 2) It is suggested by cyberpunk authors such as William Gibson and in films like the Matrix, that cyberspace can function as a simulation of offline reality. If the simulation is so complete that it is indistinguishable from the original, the original ceases to exist and the simulacra is complete. The application of these ideas to cyberspace raise questions about online identity and challenges the existing understanding of reality as an offline-only domain.

Films like The Matrix dramatise this Baudrillardian theory into a postmodern fantasy. Different realities become interchangeable and the software reality (for example the Matrix) is more convincing than embodied reality outside the machines. The Internet, in comparison, is certainly very far from being a complete simulacrum. The user is always physically aware of his or her offline existence, and remains aware of his/her body, because the body remains a necessary conduit of sensory activity. The body is the main anchor in offline reality, as current technology does not offer a complete immersion in cyberspace. It is however significant to note that the Internet has developed from a text-only environment to increasingly graphical, video and audio interface. This has allowed cyberspace to be more immersive and more convincingly compared to offline reality. As it evokes more and more of the senses, it offers an increasingly immersive environment. The fantasy of an online existence with utopian possibilities has existed from the very beginning of the original ARPA-net. This is evident in the many studies celebrating a sense of community on email list and MUDs, discussed earlier in this chapter.



N. Katherine Hayles is representative of a group of theorists who fear the reduction of material to information, uploading being an extreme example. In “How We Became Posthuman”, she describes the evolution that has culminated in thinking of a body as merely a substrate for information. This information, it is then fantasised, can equally easily be transferred into an electronic medium. This is the principle of the Moravec upload. This argument suggests that the essential qualities of identity can be reduced to information, and this can be transferred to a machine. As this machine is equivalent to the person, it would be a complete simulation, a simulacrum, of the individual. Hayles argues that this type of theory, originating in modernist thought and developed by information technology, ignores and even erases the body, particularly the gendered body. She describes this new understanding of the body as posthuman. The posthuman view is characterised by “(privileging) informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life.... The posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of the process that began before we were born.” (Hayles 3) This leads to the important belief that human beings “can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines.... there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation”(Hayles 3).

Hayles addresses several important issues of embodiment in her discussion of the posthuman. She links the desire to dissolve the body into information to the modernist duality of body and mind. She suggests that the reduction of the body to information is an attempt to control the body and represents a consequent desire to inhabit the machine. Where Hayles seem to warn the reader about the danger of this cyborg coupling, Donna Haraway constructs the “cyborg” as a potentially emancipating space.

Haraway too is aware of the modernist dualistic thinking that shapes cultural and scientific thinking. In “Cyborg’s Manifesto” she discusses the implications of the “cyborg”, which she describes as a “hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 149). She uses this



construction of the cyborg to discuss the way in which modern technology blurs the formerly impenetrable boundaries between human and animal, organism and machine, and the physical and non-physical (Harraway 151). She argues that the transgression of these boundaries deconstructs concepts like human, machine, body and gender. Consequently, there is a postmodern reconstruction of identity, based on self-conscious coalitions instead of a so-called natural order. This has an effect on how gender is understood. It is no longer based on essential embodied biological features. She envisions a political opportunity for feminists to claim a gendered identity that is not based on essentialism but on affinity. She says: "The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self the feminists must code." (Harraway 162) A deliberately gendered construction of identity can be found in the Disgruntled Housewife site discussed below, where the role of affinity is also extremely important.

In the analysis of the websites to follow, female gendered representation will be examined. A point of focus will be the way the Internet has the potential for re-defining and assembling female identity. These analyses will limit themselves to female interest websites, but further study can profitably be directed to masculine online identity construction, political affinity, and post-colonial identity construction.

Particular attention will be paid to the way in which this identity is represented as embodied. As with the review of email, I will investigate how online presence is established and used. It will be shown that although these cyber-identities are constructed and linked through clearly defined affinities, the fascination with embodiment still indicates some sort of essentialist influence. Does it become impossible to construct identity separate from material presence?

Judith Butler seems to offer a way to negotiate between the increased tendency to reduce the body to information (Hayles) or simulate the body (Baudrillard), and Harraway's potential emancipation of the known body through technological and biological hybridisation. In Bodies That Matter Butler discusses the construction of the subject in a new way that no longer opposes essentialism. As discussed in Chapter 1, Butler explains that the notion of construction has been fundamentally altered by deconstruction. She argues that construction of identity and gender does not occur



over a fixed or given substratum of a body of a particular sex. Instead, it is a “process of materialisation that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.” (Butler 9) This implies that matter is not outside the realm of construction rather is also not specifically constructed by a subject, rather by discourse. Butler suggests that these constructions of the body are ‘performative’. She defines performativity “not as the act by which the subject brings into being what she/he names but, rather, as the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.”(Butler 2)

It is difficult to extend this idea of the performance and construction of the body to the simulations of embodiment that are found in cyberspace. These simulations are not (yet) interchangeable with “real” bodies. They lack some vital dimension of presence that real bodies possess. Yet the presence of online bodies certainly, like the cyborg, deconstructs assumptions about the boundaries of the body and hence gender and identity. The problems of online embodiment will be discussed in more detail in the Ananova section.

### **Intertextuality, Narrative and Identity**

The focus of this chapter is on how Internet web-pages represent users and designers. As discussed above, it is important to analyse who and what these pages represent. It will be questioned how these pages represent cyber-bodies, and off-line bodies and whether postmodern theories of the body provide satisfactory ways to understand and theorise virtual bodies. It is also necessary to theorise the way in which identity is performed online.

This shifts the focus towards theories of representation. It will be suggested that online representation, through the medium of web-pages, is significantly different from offline, conventionally-theorised representation.

In “The Death of the Author” Barthes suggests that the prominent positioning of the author as origin of a text is a modern invention. He further goes on to explain that this is a misconception and suggests that: “writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of writing.” (Barthes, 142) He elaborates, suggesting that when



a text is narrated it is performed and its origin is not of primary importance. He goes on to explain that a linguistic understanding of texts further fundamentally changes the perception of the role of the author. From a linguistic perspective, Barthes suggests, “it is language which speaks, not the author”, and the author is never more than the instance of writing. This also changes the temporal understanding of writing. The author is no longer the father of his work and instead is born simultaneously with the text. He suggestively uses the word “performative” to describe the moment when writing is created. (Barthes, 145) This text, without origin, is a “tissue” of writings, none of which is original. Barthes concludes: “a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody and contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author.” (Barthes, 148)

Barthes’ understanding of intertextuality has strongly influenced the contemporary understanding of culture and text, as is discussed in Chapter 1. Several theorists of the Internet have strongly argued that web-pages are extreme examples of intertextual writing, as they frequently contain not only references to a multiplicity of texts, but also link to multiple other web-pages (Landlow). I will argue that this is too general a claim. Although web-pages certainly share many poststructuralist and postmodern characteristics with offline texts, their functions and structures differ significantly.

Homepages are strongly representative of their designers, as their main function is to establish the writer’s online identity. The author is trying to establish a connection between their writing and the identity they are attempting to represent. Paradoxically, they are performing their identity through the moment of writing while at the same time negating themselves as authors through the use of language. This contradictory situation differs from offline texts such as autobiography, because the user is attempting to craft online presence and even embodiment through the creation of a homepage.



Other web-pages, particularly web-rings<sup>18</sup>, play with the ambiguity of their authorship. Sections are claimed to be written by virtual characters or are contributed by users whose “real” identity cannot be verified. This ambiguous and collaborative writing seems to deconstruct Barthes’ notion of the “Death of the Author” by playfully and explicitly destabilising the ideas that the text has been produced offline by a nameable embodied origin. These pages suggest that there is no traceable embodied author.

Homepages and web-rings, as will be shown, strongly rely strongly on the intertextuality of the Internet medium. Internet texts, like other postmodern texts, are playfully inter-referential. The reader or viewer constructs the meaning of the text by tracing the competing connotations prompted by the text. As will be seen in further analysis of specific web-pages, the Internet makes frequent use of postmodern representational techniques such as bricolage and pastiche. Bricolage is the putting together of odds and ends of material that already exist. The idea that web-design frequently uses bricolage is explained by Paul Halsall: “Constructing a personal home page involves bricolage. Graphics, sounds, text and the code used to generate a particular format are often copied from other people’s pages (sometimes with some editing). Indeed, the virtual and digital nature of the Web as a medium supports the re-use in bricolage of existing materials since the model may be abstracted limitlessly whilst remaining untouched in the site where the bricoleur found it.”

(<http://www.ukans.edu/~medieval/melcher/19990401.med/msg00033.html>) Pastiche is an artistic composition imitating or caricaturing previous works. This is also frequently found on the Internet as playing with authenticity is popular and well suited to the non-verifiable nature of the Internet.

Yet, on a more fundamental structural level, the Internet is also strongly intertextual. This does not however mean that it serves as an analogy for a post-structuralist understanding of texts. The way in which web-pages are inter-related to other pages to which they are linked is different from all other offline media. I would like to suggest that the links, instead of symbolising extreme intertextuality, instead prompt a curious

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<sup>18</sup> “A Web ring (or Webring) is a way of interlinking related Web site so that you can visit each site one after the other, eventually (if you keep going) returning to the first Web site... The ring idea seems to have caught on as a more dynamic alternative to the list of “favourite sites” that many Web sites offer.” [http://searchwebmanagement.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid27\\_gci213351,00.html](http://searchwebmanagement.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid27_gci213351,00.html)



type of narrative both on the part of the writer of the web-page and the viewer or reader. A type of narrative not fully accounted for in postmodern theorising to date. Postmodernism's interest in embodiment, and post-structuralism's focus on language, as a constructor of reality, cause conflicting and contradictory moments in theorising the Internet. It is precisely these silences and gaps that challenge contemporary theory.

As metanarratives lose their significance there is an increased interest in individual narratives. (Kvale, 18) Superficially, the Internet seems devoid of narrative. Despite the spatial metaphors of travel and colonisation, the Internet seems to consist of solitary web-pages, connected by links and indexes. However, browser software does allow the user to move temporally, instead of spatially. The user can choose to click the "Back" or "Forward" button on their browser menu bar to move to a previously viewed web-page. This temporal movement forward or backward has more in common with narrative than spatial travel, as a context of web-pages is created.

Particularly in the case of homepages and linked sites in a web-ring, there is a strong relationship between the inter-related sites. This relationship can be usefully conceptualised as a type of narrative. It appears as if web-authors write to the sites on which they are listed, their parent sites. These web-pages often have similar graphical structures, similar discourses, tone, and inter-referential content.

This leads to a type of cohesion between sites that influences the way in which cyber-identity and the performance of identity is understood. It links up with Haraway's notion of non-essentialist feminism that is based on affinity. It appears as if users affiliate themselves according to political, social or other affinities, causing the formation of the much-discussed "cyber-communities". This kind of dialogue between different texts is also a kind of narrative. Hence, the creation and maintenance of online identity (even if only an extension of an offline identity) is the writing of a story. However, this narrative is fundamentally about the construction of a subject, as discussed in Chapter 1. It is a performative act on the part of the author and therefore its meaning is not only located with the reader but also with the writer. Particularly in the case of homepages, which may not be prominently listed or



accessible, the writer may be the only person who reads the homepage, but its existence ‘proves’ the existence of the online subject.

### **Homepages: Grown Men Cry**

Personal homepages are a fundamental tool to establish online presence. They remain a construction of identity when the user is offline, as others can access them at any time. They are closely connected to the user’s offline identity and often contain autobiographical text, photographs and graphics. It is important to realise that they remain a carefully constructed representation. This representation is not transparent. Although the content often takes the tone of a frank confession, it necessarily conceals much of the offline self, particularly the body, and is limited and restricted by the medium of web-pages. This concealment and revelation of the embodied self is of particular interest to this analysis.

Personal homepages serve several functions on the Internet. Many personal homepages are representations of the user’s professional identity. These pages may contain the curriculum vita of job-seekers or professional or academic articles. Such sites will be listed in professional directories and be relatively consistent with offline professional representations of the user. These sites are mostly text and their addresses show that they are often connected to a professional institution or organisation, instead of a private ISP<sup>19</sup> or web-directory. Personal homepages are often occupied by families who post family news and photographs. Occasionally individuals create personal homepages purely to indicate their on and off-line presence.

A selection of such web-pages can be found at [www.grownmencry.com/mijo/Femmass.html](http://www.grownmencry.com/mijo/Femmass.html). The title of this pages reads: “The personal homepages of the female masses”. This site has been chosen because it contains a large directory of homepages and the site is managed by a private person and is hence not affiliated to a particular software group or ISP. It is assumed that this means that users have explicitly chosen to affiliate themselves with this site. This implies that these users were not offered space to post a web-page but had to apply to

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<sup>19</sup> Internet Service Provider



the site manager. It is for this reason important to examine the parent site that attracted these users and frames these homepages.

The parent site can be found at [www.grownmency.com](http://www.grownmency.com), which is listed at Yahoo. It is an index site<sup>1</sup> created by L. Michelle Johnson. It is a visually evocative site, indicating by a graphic collage Johnson's sense of identity and establishing the atmosphere of the site. This site serves several functions. It is firstly the visual representation of the site titled "Makes Grown Men Cry". Secondly, it serves as a frame for the sites linked to this index site, and hence indicates and influences the tone and content to follow. Thirdly, it functions as the first layer of Michelle Johnson's cyber-selves.



**FIG.1** [www.grownmency.com](http://www.grownmency.com)

The site (Fig. 1) indicates by its bare Arial text that it "makes grown men cry" but is not at all aggressive. The image is semicircular on a black background and made up of layers of superimposed images. This echoes the way in which the user will soon travel through the layers of Johnson's site. The collage depicts an urban building as seen when glancing upwards in a city street. This is overlapped by the next layer on which a parking sign is vaguely visible. This is a possible reference to the fact that this site

<sup>20</sup>An index site lists all the secondary sites created by the user. It is a homepage that does not contain much information but instead functions as a portal to several equally important sites.



houses the web-pages or ‘vehicles’ of many other women. Placed above the word “parking” and possibly part of the same sign, are the words “hotel”, “marriage” and “wedding”. These words are like signs seen on city buildings but are noticeable because they are not part of the underlying image and are not in proportion to it. The third layer is of the interior of a living room, again a metaphor for a space to live in. The final layer of the collage is a sunflower and the face of a woman. The sunflower is a discordant note as it is the only non-urban symbol in the collage. The face of the woman is the most prominent feature of the web-page as it is assertively positioned diagonally above the slogan. The collage is in shades of blue, but the women’s hair is highlighted in a sharp orange, linking it to the menu bar below and firmly drawing her to the foreground. Her face is expressionless and large sunglasses cover her eyes. To understand how or why she makes grown men cry the user must enter further into the site by clicking on one of the menu options.



**FIG. 2** [www.grownmencry.com/mijo/homepages.html](http://www.grownmencry.com/mijo/homepages.html)

The link “homepages” takes the user to another portal site (Fig. 2). It also has a black background with a collage of images in the foreground. As the images are constructed from multiple existing sources with their own meanings, it can be seen as an example



of bricolage. The colour scheme is less harsh, with the orange replaced by warming yellow. The images are no longer only in monochrome blue, and include shades of amber, yellow and green. The warmer, softer shades are less assertive and more welcoming. This atmosphere is strongly reinforced by the central yellow shaft of colour imitating a beam of sunlight. It has been placed off-centre and highlights the “home” in homepages. Like the previous web-page, this image is also built up by overlapping images. The sense of foreground, background and depth is established by the use of contrasting colour. The shaft of yellow colour “shines” onto the woman in the foreground, giving the impression of depth in an image that is not realistically representative. This establishes a visual link between the woman and the word “home”.

The yellow shaft highlights the larger image of the sunflower, linking this page to the previous index page and indicating a spatial progression: the viewer is coming closer to the flower and hence it appears larger. The sunflower appears to function as a metaphor for the woman on the net as it is visually linked to the word home and the woman. This connection between women’s homepages and flower imagery will be pursued later in this analysis.

Whereas all the other images in the collage are altered photographic images, the woman is represented as a drawing or multimedia artwork. This creates a contrast between the realistic representations, although adapted and altered, and the created image of the woman. This draws the users’ attention to the idea that the images of the women about to follow are constructed representations of identity, but equally comments on the way in which no images are ‘real’, not even photographs, as they can all be digitally altered.

The woman is drawn in charcoal or pastels in shades of yellow, amber and green. The image is romantic and nostalgic as the clothing and sun hat suggest country picnics. The sunglasses are the only suggestion of technological presence and serve again to conceal the expression, and even identity, of the woman. The drawn representation of this woman also conceals the ‘real’ bodies of the women hidden behind these portal sites, and appears to be deliberately ‘low-tech’. I will continue to question the way in which women’s bodies are revealed and concealed in the homepages to come.



The background images are once again urban buildings, and the dark silhouette of the aeroplane in the otherwise yellow focal shaft once again reminds the user of the virtual metaphors of transportation. The viewer will be travelling to meet the women at their cyber-homes.

The blue link “Fem●mass: The personal homepages of the female masses” leads the user to a third portal site <http://www.grownmencry.com/mijo/Femmass.html> (Fig. 3). This site contrasts sharply with the previous sites as it uses a white ‘page-like’ background. The heading “fem●mass” is in a simple Courier-style font and the text that follows in Arial and Times New Roman font. The title “Fem●mass” is not just a catchy abbreviation of “female masses”, but also has the connotation of ‘female mass’, the embodied presence that has mass, indicating an undeniably physical attribute not representable in cyberspace. This is perhaps emphasised by the solid bullet intersecting the title.

This page requires much less technical expertise to construct than the previous page and sets the tone for the less specialised homepages to follow. In contrast to the previous two pages, this site does not contain original artwork and complicated photographic manipulation. It is as if Johnson moves from a more public, polished representation of herself and her site to the role of site-manager. This site functions as a frame for sites to follow. Both visually and textually, it sets the expectations of the viewer and indicates the demarcations Johnson sets for homepage authors.

Despite the minimalist and conventional layout, this site is nevertheless still a strong reflection of one of the facets of Johnson’s cyber-identity. In each of the links leading from the main index site Johnson seems to present another facet of herself as the sites create different social environments. The Fem●mass site, as the immediate portal to the homepages, frames the way the viewer will read these sites, as it is read first.





FIG. 3 [www.grownmencry.com/mijo/Femmass.html](http://www.grownmencry.com/mijo/Femmass.html)

The text on this page, like the overlapping images on the previous pages, is a collage of discourses. This is also evident in the choice of keywords Johnson listed for this site.<sup>1</sup> The keywords selected by Johnson are: “woman, women’s, homepages, female, best sites, feminists, girls, lesbians, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, real deal”. These keywords indicate the multiple modes of femininity created by culture, and represent women’s roles. Through the inhabitation of these roles, women construct their

<sup>21</sup>When the source code of a webpage is viewed, the keywords selected by the author can be seen. These keywords are ‘seen’ by a search engine and determine which search words will match and cause this page to be displayed as a link.



changing identities. These keywords refer to offline life and this suggests that this site could be become a virtual home corresponding to offline life. The inclusion of the word “feminism” suggests a political dimension to the space created for the women. The words “best site” and “real deal” attempt to advertise the authenticity and quality of the site.

The image and corresponding text introduce yet another discourse. The picture is a simple image of hands shielding a candle in nostalgic two-tone sienna and black. The words are part of an American gospel song and the tone is in contrast to the more assertive political agenda of this index of homepages. The image of the shielded candle becomes an extended metaphor in which Johnson describes the selection of web-pages as those that “shine”. The candle flame is also vulnerable, perhaps suggesting that the representations of identity need a special environment. This metaphor links the highlighted yellow “home” on the previous page with the promises that if you have lost your way these pages will bring you home.

The home Johnson has created has been controlled and maintained according to criteria that are more political. The key words and text indicate that Johnson wants to promote a female alliance based on affinity. The website is a home for women who share social and cultural positions, and hence political goals. This is similar to Haraway’s idea of postmodern feminism. These women become cyborgs by inhabiting this virtual home. They do however place emphasis on their physical embodiment by including photographs, emphasising their primary location in the offline world. This perhaps undermines some of the liberating qualities Haraway ascribes to her feminist cyborgs. The website, [www.disgruntledhousewives.com](http://www.disgruntledhousewives.com), is another example of claiming Internet space in terms of affinity and will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

The main block of text takes the tone of a manifesto as it declares the type of content approved and listed by Johnson. There is no pretence of impartiality as Johnson purposefully declares the boundaries of this cyber-space: “No commercial sites. No men. No fluff. Just the Real Deal.” With this line she indicates a curious seriousness and assertiveness. The sites to follow will be authentic and will be concerned with the promotion of identity. The promise of the “Real Deal”, a phrase borrowed from



American politics and advertising, is linked to the idea that this is not a space for concealment, instead authentic value is promised. “Personalities”, and hence identities will be revealed. In this statement, Johnson is critical of the creation of web-pages as artifices, instead of reflections of identity. This is ironic as Johnson’s own web-pages are so carefully constructed to reveal very little. It is interesting that Johnson implies that homepages are frequently no more than a list of links, as the Internet medium directly relates how frequently a page is linked to its value.<sup>22</sup>

Despite Johnson’s manifesto, the identities revealed on the web-pages to follow are necessarily constructed, because they are the creation of an online persona, even if that persona is supposed to have a true correspondence with the embodied offline identity. The analysis to follow will also show that, like Johnson’s sites, the authors of the homepages are self-conscious of the constructed nature of their pages, and intentionally play and perform their representations through the careful use of the Internet medium.

The links on the bottom of “Homepages Fem●mass” are in a standard alphabetical index format. These links are followed by the main “Make Grown Men Cry” index sites. Category “B” has been chosen as for the closer analysis of specific homepages.

Selecting the category “B” loads yet another index site. This site lists and introduces the homepage authors in category “B”. The format of the list is standardised by Johnson and follows an analogous format to the previous parallel to Homepages Fem●mas. Each person has a thumbnail photograph and a paragraph-length space to introduce herself. It is clear from the tone of most of the introductory paragraphs that the Internet is a strongly intertextual environment. The authors have been influenced by the textual environment that Johnson has created and are responding and continuing the narratives while constructing their own cyber-identities. In Johnson’s introductory “manifesto” statement on <http://www.grownmencry.com/mijo/Femmass.html> she combines an aggressive feminist statement with several other types of discourse. The tone of Johnson’s

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<sup>22</sup> Most search engines use keywords and the number of detected links to a page as the main criteria for successful ‘hits’. As will be discussed later, Internet researches use similar methodological criteria to judge the relative value of webpages.



introduction is a curious mixture of maternal intimacy (“Just hang onto that keyboard little mama. These pages are gonna bring you home”) and soapbox politics (“No commercial sites. No men. No fluff. Just the Real Deal”). It appears that the homepage owners are choosing to write back in this curious mixture of discourses and tone. The style is that of revealed confidences and confession, and this is significant as the introductory paragraphs are the first direct opportunity these users have to speak for themselves and represent themselves. The structure of this representation is still dictated by Johnson’s structure and forms a dialogic response to her introduction. I believe that a further analysis of specific homepages will show that the process of constructing a homepage, and hence a cyber-identity, creates narratives specific to the Internet. These narratives expand and change as authors manipulate the structure and content of this medium. As suggested in Chapter 1, it is a more theatrical narrativity than meanings of post-structuralist ‘intertextuality’ suggest.

Johnson’s index site is a good example of the variations and permutations created within her predetermined structure. Although the formal structure of the page and the content of the previous pages seem to strongly influence the performance of identity on this page, the users subtly play with and react to these limitations, hence responding to Johnson. The photographs are a good example of this. As previously mentioned, the size, colour, and position of the photographs are determined by Johnson. The photographs are further framed by the familiar image of the hands shielding the candle, signifying Johnson’s introduction. Most of the photographs are scanned in identity photographs, representing the homepage authors in the same way that they would verify their offline identities. These photographs are standardised representations and for this reason don’t reveal much personal information about the author.

The exception is Leigh Baker-Foley and Indina Beuche who have cropped their images from personal photographs. These images are less clear as identifiers of the offline bodies. Beuche is even looking away from the camera, but such images are in some ways more revealing as they affirm the existence of offline circumstances. They are direct references to offline life and capture a moment from this life in a more anthropological way than an identity photo. An identity photo is instead primarily intended as an accurate identification of the offline body.



Jessica Barron subverts the structure in a more obvious way by concealing her face in an image that is meant to serve as an identifier. Summer Burton's image is a clear example of the interaction between the Johnson's index page and this user. She has inverted Johnson's candle image and has put it in place of an identifying image of her offline body.

This type of concealment under the guise of play is very interesting. In fact, it can be seen that most of the play in these homepages centres on the process of revealing identity. The final destination page is where the representation of online identity is located. This suggests a desire to see the page on the part of the viewer, and a desire to control on the part of the page designer. It is perhaps an unexpected dynamic to associate with the Internet, but the analysis that follows will show it to be quite common.

The game invites the viewer to enter into a game or dialogue with the author, creating a narrative. Summer Burton's site is a particularly explicit example of this. Intriguingly, her introductory paragraph tells the viewer very little about her political or social affiliations. Instead it suggests that she likes to disrupt situations by screaming, a sound prior to language that asserts her bodily existence. Yet, her link leads the user to a page that reveals even less about her cyber-identity or offline identity. Like Johnson's sites, she leads the user through several portal sites before allowing them to view her homepage. This game of revealing and concealing is explicitly playful.

The first site, <http://www.realtime.net/~melissab/> (Fig.4), reveals an image of a section of a face with the eyes shut, concealed. The words "change" and "boingyboingy – click" are all links to the next page. The dialogical interaction between Burton and the viewer is reinforced by the message "just jump" displayed, every time the viewer runs his/her mouse over the links.



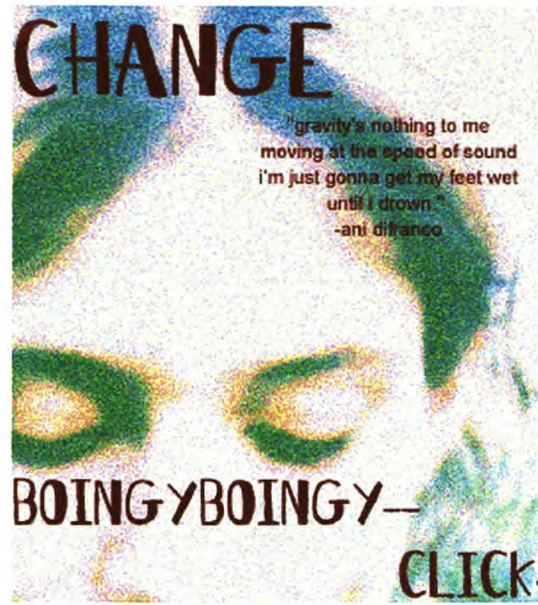


FIG. 4 [www.realtime.net/~melissab/](http://www.realtime.net/~melissab/)

Burton is playing with the medium of web-pages and drawing the viewer into a narrative of travel. This is reinforced by the next page, <http://boingyboingy.com/>. Burton is deliberately hiding behind these layers of web-pages in an environment that values quick access to information. It is almost as if she wants to keep her homepage secret from most users who will be discouraged by the many portals and control those who follow the links to play her game. When the viewer clicks on the monkey, he/she is transported to <http://boingyboingy.com/jump/index.html> (fig.5) where images of Burton are finally revealed.

These images form a visually powerful panel down along the right side of the page. Again, the game of hide and seek, revelation and concealment, is evident. The images are a combination of close-ups, where even the usually unseen, like the tongue, are displayed, in contrast to Burton hiding behind her hand or striking a dust jacket pose. The text has another clear reference to Johnson's introduction, suggesting her name should be accompanied by the song "This little light of mine". The body of text is in the style of chatting and list or newsgroup writing, evident in the use of the emoticon "P" and the typing abbreviations "4ever" and "I". Using this style, Burton positions herself as a member of an "in group", who use the Internet frequently and are familiar with its slang.



# boingyboingy

summer anne  
accompanied by  
this little light  
get it  
etcetera

"future plans: ... find summer a boyfriend" -matt c.'s  
yearbook questionnaire

hi... i haven't updated in 4ever cuz i'm not very happy  
with this layout and i'm working on a new one. of  
course, timing is stupid and by the time my new  
layout is done, i'll have to leave for a month (camp!),  
so :-P to that. but new stuff should be up in the next  
couple weeks. sorry for the delay, dears. (-summer,  
8-4-00)

rings . email . guestbook . credits  
last updated 6.2.00



FIG. 5 <http://boingyboingy.com/jump/index.html>

The names of Kym Banoczi (<http://www.kymmi.com/>), Vicky Jean Beauchamp (<http://www.hevanet.com/chezxx/chezxx/>), Cynsa Bonorris (<http://www.well.com/user/cynsa/index.html>), and Kia Lychelle Bright (<http://www.mindspring.com/~lychelle/main.htm>), all also lead the user through at least one portal site that serves as an index site. Postponing the arrival at the personal homepage seems to be a kind of concealment and power play by the author and requires determination on the part of the viewer. It is important to note that, unlike Summer Burton's sites, these index sites have a practical function. They provide a structural layout of diverse personal information and like Johnson's index sites, construct a context through which the personal homepage will be viewed.

Banoczi and Beauchamp's index pages are remarkably similar. They both have an image of a lotus-type flower around which their links are arranged. The black background and central object layout is quite common to indexes, but the similarity of the images and content is strange. Bright's block layout differs somewhat, mostly because her links are not clearly referential. Words like "mud" do not clearly indicate what sort of information will be found when the link is followed.



All three sites contain images of flowers, although Bright's flower seems to serve mostly as a decorative flourish. Given the prominent positioning of the sunflower in Johnson's first two portal sites, there seems to be a symbolic link between the image of a flower and women's home-sites. It would be interesting to see whether this holds true in a larger survey or whether these images are due to an interaction with Johnson's site.

Of significance is that these flowers stand in for images of these women. They become a representation for their identities and signify their presence. The link between femininity and flowers has been culturally established through literature and art. It is presumably this representational language that these women are drawing on. This multi-layered representation is a characteristic of postmodern texts.

When selecting Banoczi's "personal" link, <http://www.kymmi.com/personal.html>, the viewer arrives at a text page that "shares" in a conversational tone. The style and content are quite different from the introductory paragraph on the Fem•mass, which is more aggressive and attention-seeking. Intriguingly, it focuses attention on the pain involved in getting a tattoo and nose-ring, strongly invoking powerful sensations only experienced by offline bodies.

In contrast, Beauchamp's introductory paragraph reveals very little of the cyber-identity to be revealed at <http://www.hevanet.com/chezxx/chezxx/bio.html>. The name "Chez xx" reveals this new identity, which seems to be an amalgamation of several online identities and Beauchamp's offline identity. Her description of her self as: "an anarchist bi-dyke/pop-culture-enthusiast/mild-mannered secretary" declares the blurring of categories of identity. Her biographical information, written in mock-c.v. format, reveals the construction of identity out of a hybridisation of social spheres. The reference to geek code<sup>23</sup> is a good example of a closed Internet community language, which is added to Chez xx's description of her identity, but hidden from those who are not members of the community.

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<sup>23</sup> Geek code is a type of language made up of abbreviations and symbols. It is based on the syntax of some computer programming languages. It is only understood by a select few who belong to that community and are interested in learning it.



As previously mentioned, Bright's index site is more playful. She does not even clearly reveal the content of the links in her index site, but offers a few cryptic words of explanation when the viewer's mouse is poised over a link. The phrase "Go away" reveals the explanation "the obligatory links". This semi-aggressive tone is also evident in the email information at the bottom of the index site. The email link provided is fake and contains the words "DONTSENDMESTUPIDSTUFF". Bright sarcastically advises correspondents to remove these words to activate the real email address. These strategies keep the user at a distance. Yet, intriguingly, the homepage to come is a confession in list format of Bright's insecurities and fears and passions.

Cynsa Bonorris's index page shows a strong involvement with online media. The link to her personal homepage is titled "Finger Cynsa" which is a reference to the very beginning of computer networks when unix<sup>24</sup> programming language was the interface. The command "Finger" was used to gain biographical information about another user. This link reveals a nostalgia about the beginning of the Internet when users were members of a very small club. Her homepage, at <http://www.well.com/user/cynsa/finger.html>, shows an enlarged version of the image displayed on the Fem•mass B index. The text is in Courier font that was the only font originally available for computer communication. The "well"<sup>25</sup> email address also shows that Cynsa is a member of one of the first online communities. The poetry and other personal snippets once again invoke different discourses of the professional, playful and personal. The final paragraph is a repetition of the introductory paragraph on the Fem•mass page, invoking a nostalgic moment in American history and linking Cynsa's online persona with specific offline events.

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<sup>24</sup> UNIX is an early operating system with a text only interface. The user manipulates his environment by typing command lines. It has a difficult interface and is frequently used by programmers.

<sup>25</sup> An email address taking the form of [username@well.com](mailto:username@well.com) indicates that the user has joined the well group.



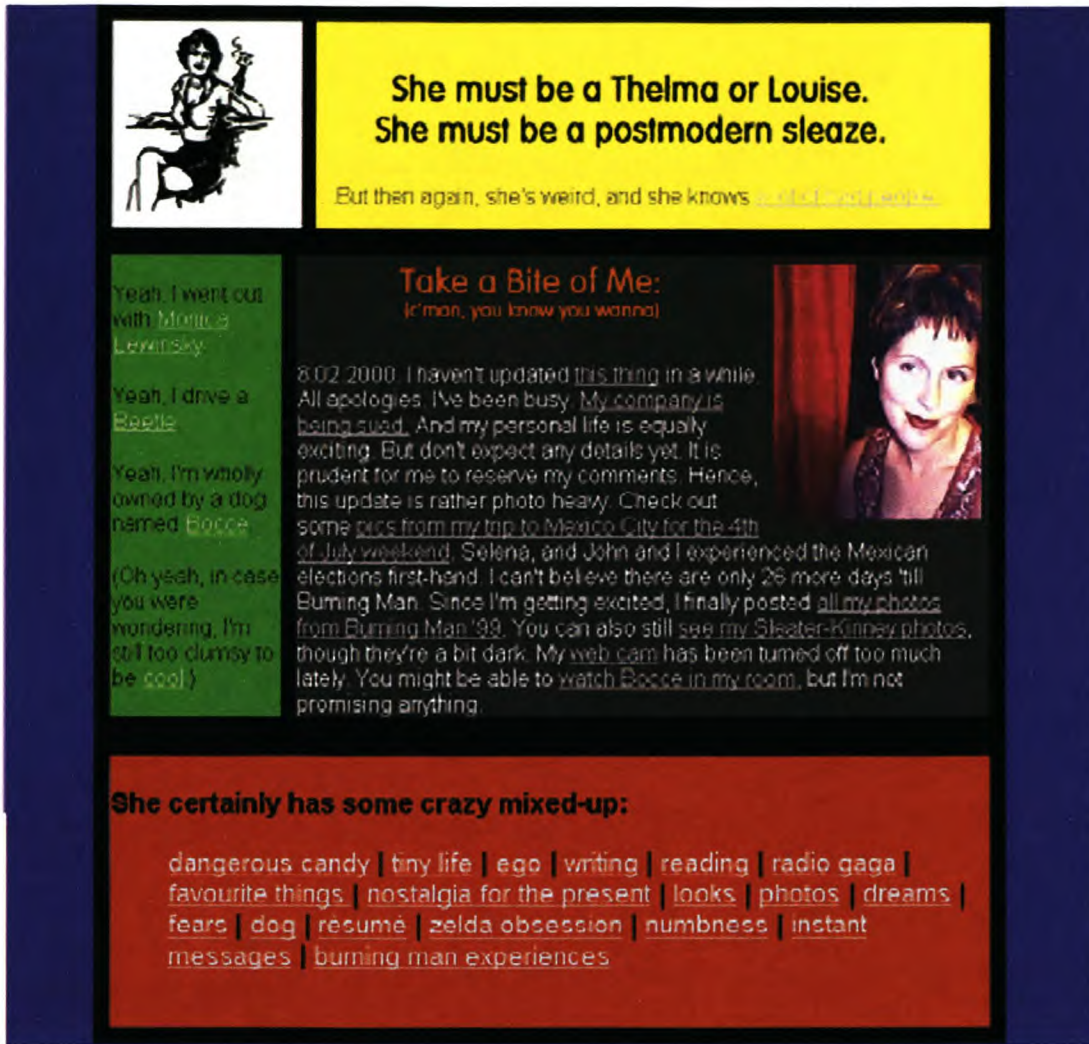


FIG. 6 [www.poprocks.com](http://www.poprocks.com)

Jessica Barron's image on the Fem•mass B index page seems to be responding to Johnson's "Grown Men Cry" site as it also shows a face concealed by hair in a bob and sunglasses. However, her name is a direct link to <http://www.poprocks.com/> (Fig. 6), her personal homepage. This page is creative and interactive. It is densely loaded with links, and seems to be a combination of a journal and an index. The clear image of Barron's face is in such strong contrast with the previous image that one is not sure whether they represent the same person. This is yet another example of how the media of the Internet destabilise online and in this case offline, information. The photographic image is juxtaposed with a cartoon image of a woman smoking, which seems to also be a representation of Barron. The style of this drawing is reminiscent of the fifties. As will be shown in the analysis of [www.disgruntledhousewife.com](http://www.disgruntledhousewife.com), the appropriation of this version of femininity is common and seems to subvert the values associated with this time. This is also evident in the large text accompanying this



image. Barron says of herself, in the third person, “She must be Thelma or Louise. She must be a postmodern sleaze.” The switch between third and first person is unusual and effective. It playfully lends a sense of authority to the statement made in the third person and incorporates a sense of dialogue between an unknown speaker (who ironically is also Barron) and the viewer of the page. It also shows how the construction of this identity is a clearly self-conscious process. Once again, as in the other homepages discussed, the represented identity is also composed of the links referred to in this page. This page is one of the few pages that are updated frequently making the material on a specific version of a page unstable and fleeting. This is a much more active performance of identity than found in the more static pages. It hence makes this kind of homepage differ significantly from offline autobiographical texts as it is not static and reflects changes. It also challenges the theoretical understanding of fixed texts. It can be read and analysed as a static text, as done here, but could also change significantly at any time, creating an evolving text with a shifting meaning. This makes any reference to the content of this text unstable.

An analysis of these homepages raises a number of questions and interrogates contemporary theories of text and identity. Barthes’ assumptions about text and how it functions were not written with online texts in mind. Similarly, theories of embodiment have not until recently been theorised to incorporate the possibilities of cyber-bodies. This analysis of homepages shows how these contemporary theories do not adequately theorise the relationships between identity and representation in technologically changing environments.

Judith Butler says that performativity is “the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler 2). I want to argue that the homepages, in connection with “Makes Grown Men Cry”, are examples of the performance of identity and gender as suggested by Butler. She uses the term specifically in connection with embodiment, but does not connect her discussions to the Internet or the virtual body. On the homepages, this performance is still connected to the body but in this case to the virtual body, which is often closely connected to the offline body.



These homepages serve as a site for self-representation. This might lead to the assumption that they attempt to reveal as much as possible about their offline authors. Instead, analysis reveals that this is not true. The authors respond to Johnson's site and the limitations of her layout. They are influenced by their neighbours and the political tone of Johnson's introductory page. This causes them to structure their pages within these limitations and in response to their virtual neighbourhood. This interaction with other sites is a performative type of intertextuality.

These homepages, and of course Johnson's site, are specifically for women only, on <http://www.grownmencry.com/mijo/Femmass.html> by "No men". This leads to a deliberately gendered space. I suggest that these pages are cyborg constructions of identity and that their references to other women and women's sites construct them as gendered in terms of Haraway's idea of affinity. They become a women's space, with political possibilities.

This, however, only describes part of the nature of these distinctly female sites. An elaboration on Butler's notion of performativity will perhaps create a fuller picture. Not only are the sites characterised by their intertextual content, but also by the "hide and seek" games they play. The pages playfully reveal and conceal the embodied identity of the authors through photographs and descriptions. Like all online information, it is unstable and unverifiable. For example, the photos could be old or of someone else. Yet, it does create the effect of online presence backed by a claim to an offline body. The representations of these bodies online make them a hybrid of virtual and real bodies, again not unlike Haraway's cyborg.

### **Web-rings: Disgruntled Housewife**

The website, [www.disgruntledhousewife.com](http://www.disgruntledhousewife.com) (Fig.7), has been chosen for analysis because it concentrates a number of relevant features on interlinked websites. It is connected to, and listed on, other websites and web-directories. As will be discussed in detail below, it also interacts with its viewers or readers through email, and email forums. The effect of this interconnectedness is that the site is in constant flux as Nikol Lohr and her readers add, change and exchange narratives. This site is also of interest because it deals with women's experiences, like many of the homepages discussed in the previous section. Lohr subverts earlier models of femininity to



express her own personal brand of feminism, and invites interaction from her readers. Her discussions and depictions of the female body are also relevant as a type of cyber-embodiment.

The site is very large and only a few sections will be selected for discussion. An examination of both structure and content will reveal that Lohr creates a unique and significant web-space in which her audience can interact and perform.

At the top of the homepage of “Disgruntled Housewife” are banners<sup>26</sup>. Banners usually advertise the site sponsor’s websites. In this case, the only advertising banner is part of the chickclick banner, indicating that Disgruntled Housewife is probably self-sponsored. The chickclick ([www.chickclick.com](http://www.chickclick.com)) banner, and indicates the affiliation of this site with the larger group of chickclick sites. Immediately below the chickclick banner is a link to the IndieGURL network ([www.indiegurl.com](http://www.indiegurl.com)), another web-ring<sup>27</sup> affiliation. These affiliations are very important to the analysis of this site. This site and its “sub-sites” do not function in isolation. They are closely intertwined with other sites, and their “sub-sites”. These sites complement and interact with the content of Disgruntled Housewife. This kind of interaction was also found in the discussion of home pages in the previous section.

The chickclick and indieGURL sites are both larger and broader in scope than the Disgruntled Housewife site. Indiegurl derives its name from the amalgamation of “indie”; referring to independent non-affiliated producers of art, film, and music; and a combination of “girl” and “URL”, a web address that describes a Web page to be accessed with an HTTP (Web browser) application. The site contains a menu of websites, listing Disgruntled Housewife. The web-ring describes itself as: “...a virtual community for aspiring female webmistresses. All sites are created, developed and produced by some of the hottest cyber goddesses on the planet.” The web-ring sites are not visible on the main page and, like Chickclick, it serves mostly as an index site.

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<sup>26</sup> “Depending on how it’s used, a banner is either a graphic image that announces the name or identity of a site (and often is spread across the width of the Web page) or is an advertising image.”

[http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,289893,sid9\\_gci211635,00.html](http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,289893,sid9_gci211635,00.html)


<sup>27</sup> “A Web ring (or Webring) is a way of interlinking related Web site so that you can visit each site one after the other, eventually (if you keep going) returning to the first Web site... The ring idea seems to have caught on as a more dynamic alternative to the list of “favourite sites” that many Web sites offer.”

[http://searchwebmanagement.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid27\\_gci213351,00.html](http://searchwebmanagement.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid27_gci213351,00.html)




Newsletter: Subscribe now. It's free!  
your email:  [Join!](#)

Like what you see? Then [send this page to a friend](#)



No, I haven't overcome my Neurosis—I've just buried it a little. Now that Zoe frames are gone, Neurosis [she is here](#).

**What's New...**  
6/30/00 The Country Club (Disgruntled Housewife Bulletin Boards). It's true! I finally fixed up the bulletin boards. I installed 4 months ago. Yippee!




Even if those Country Club bitches down the street teased you like a pinish, now you can be the first on your block to [join the Club!](#) And none of those exorbitant dues!

**Frames-free site.** No more of those pesky frames. Plus lots of new stuff!

- [Linktastic](#) [New Links!](#) Hooray!
- [Pregnancy](#) [Fan Mail Randomizer](#). See there? I'm not so bad.
- [Post Office](#) [Hot Mail Randomizer](#). Crybabies who don't like me.
- [Cocktail Lounge](#) [Girls Glasses added](#). Get an eyefull!
- [Collection Connection](#) [Papsback](#). [Trash updated & revised!](#) Oh boy! Lots of new books and pictures, and a much nicer layout.


Also, [Snowdome List updated](#) & new collections added. Will everyone who sent me a snowball [email me](#) and tell me which one they sent? If I haven't already, I'll send you a little thank you present.


 Web page unavailable offline


## Disgruntled Housewife


your guide to modern living & intersex relationships


choose yer poison...


  
Dick List


  
Ask Queenie

  
Girls I Like


  
Confessions


  
Naked Ladies


  
Linktastic


  
Stacy

  
Pregnancy


  
7 Deadly Sins


  
Products


  
Meats Men Like


  
Post Office


  
Fears


  
Haji!

  
Big Question

  
Working

  
Cocktail Lounge

  
Collections



**Linking to Disgruntled Housewife?**

Use this handy graphic! I love you for linking anywhere, but I love you more if you use this here page yer lookin at (<http://www.disgruntledhousewife.com/>)

Copy this code to paste the link and graphic above:

```
<a href="http://www.disgruntledhousewife.com/">img src="http://www.disgruntledhousewife.com/general/housewife_link.gif" width="98" height="100" border="0"></a>
```

Or use this for a text link:

```
<a href="http://www.disgruntledhousewife.com/">Disgruntled Housewife</a>
```

Web page unavailable offline

Internet Explorer connected to the Internet

Please try the following

Thank you for selecting this ad

FIG. 7 [www.disgruntledhousewife.com](http://www.disgruntledhousewife.com)

In contrast, Chickclick seems to cater to a younger and less web-focussed audience. The lay out is much more like a magazine. The sub-sites are more like subsections of a magazine and the pages are called “articles”.

Disgruntled Housewife seems to cater for an audience somewhere in between these other sites. The home-page introductory note says: “Disgruntled Housewife: your guide to modern living and intersex relationships.” The tone is immediately set as ironic because of the ‘retro’ graphics. The analysis of this page and its sub-pages will focus on the audience it interacts with and the space it creates.



The page is made up of several frames<sup>28</sup>, each with its own content, although the page works as a whole visually. The frames are barely visible, as a pale blue outline, but together with the content they create clear divisions. The main sections are “Welcome to my Neurosis”, “Vote”, “What’s New”, “Disgruntled Housewife: your guide to modern living and intersex relationships” and “Linking to Disgruntled Housewife”. The main focus of the page is the “Disgruntled Housewife: your guide to modern living and intersex relationships” section, and the viewer’s attention is drawn there by the large graphic of a woman, which functions as a logo for this site.

A prominent feature of this site is the strong visual content. The menus take the form of graphics and force the user to browse intuitively instead of offering a comprehensive navigation map or menu. This is significant as it changes the way users understand and use websites. The graphic menu is most evident in the main “Disgruntled Housewife” section. The invitation “choose yer poison” sets the tone for the exploration and shows that this is not a site for the dissemination of facts. It is instead an invitation to a voyeuristic exploration of narratives.

Each of the graphics under the invitation “choose yer poison” is a click-able link to sub-pages of this site. Unusually, the graphical links change when the mouse is run over them, and additional text tag is displayed. Graphical icons used to indicate links are not that unusual but the non-linear and creative use of them in this site certainly gives an indication of its alternative approach to web-page design and the style of the pages to follow.

The illustration of the woman in blue sets the tone of the site and becomes a symbolic representation of the site on other pages. If you link yourself to the “Disgruntled Housewife” site using the information provided on Lohr’s page, the link will be the graphic of the woman in blue, as is explained and indicated in the pink block, on the bottom of the home page, titled “Linking to Disgruntled Housewife?”

The main graphic representing the site is the glamorous woman in the blue dress. She looks like an illustration from a fifties magazine and her elegant appearance

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<sup>28</sup> Frames are a way of dividing web pages into separately programmed sections, giving it greater functionality and navigability.



contradicts the title, which suggests a homely if unhappy woman. Both the picture and the title are ironically nostalgic. This impression is reinforced by the icon graphics, which appear to be drawn from similar magazines or newspapers. The items collected by the web-author, Nikol Lohr, displayed on the site, also stem from this period.

The significance of these ‘retro’ graphics is that they refer to a specific image of femininity that Lohr subverts by placing them in the context of her web-page, she thereby reinforcing her ironic tone. The references to the fifties are important because it is a time in which American femininity was actively being shaped by the media. During the Second World War women worked in men’s jobs and were reluctant to return to the home after the war. This threatened the job market for the returning soldiers. Government and private agencies strove to convince women that they belonged in the home. Rebellion against this strong cultural programming, together with the independence women had experienced during the war, were important contributing factors to the feminist movements of the sixties and seventies.

By positioning herself as a “disgruntled” housewife, Lohr pre-empts the feminist content of her site. Her version of feminism is not intellectual and has some of the “sisterhood” style of feminism found in women’s magazines and sites like Chickclick. She uses a colloquial style and draws on common experiences and creates a sense of solidarity. The Dick List is a good example of this. She does however, also use images that are not conventionally associated with female empowerment, (e.g. the “Naked Ladies”) site, and subverts them for her individual and personal purposes. This can be seen as an example of how online representations can alter the understanding of concepts like gender.

The way she uses the changing icons is particularly interesting, and the unusual use of images from the fifties is prominent. I want to discuss a few of the icons in more detail and then briefly analyse some of the more revealing and interesting sub-pages.

The first thing to notice about the icons is that the graphic changes as the mouse runs over it. In some cases the new image just reinforces the impression created by the first image but sometimes it adds an ironic secondary interpretation. A strong example of this is the icon for “Working” which is a peanut, implying the expression “working



for peanuts”. The mouse-over<sup>29</sup> image reveals a fifties style illustration of two delicate, bound hands. This adds the meaning of bondage and lack of freedom. On mouse-over a second caption is displayed: “working for the Man”, implying a specific gendered and cultural experience.

The link “Girls I Like” also has an ironic pair of graphics. The first image is a pleasant, welcoming woman’s face, but on mouse-over a pair of wrestling women is revealed, with the one woman holding the other in a stranglehold and attempting to stab her in the back. This adds an ironic sense of ambivalence and indicates Lohr’s feeling of other women as potential competitors and traitors. This is oddly out of sync with the site it links to, which is a tribute to Lohr’s best friends. It seems that not only do the double links add meaning, often in the form of irony, but they are also meant to create a specific atmosphere, sometimes at odds with the site contents.

An important feature of this site is the way it continuously links to other sites and to its viewers. The site and the links change quite often and it is this interactive and inter-textual quality that fundamentally separates web-pages from offline media like books and film. In this regard the “linktastic” link is important. It features a can of linked sausages. This pun is continued in the second, mouse-over, graphic. Like the “Girls I Like” mouse-over, it is intended to shock. The second graphic is an illustration of a naked girl in a cowboy hat and boots, smoking while lounging in a hotdog. Her bikini tan lines are visible, and she is cast as the very opposite of the fifties housewife. The sausage in the hotdog links with the can of sausages in the previous image. The origin of this graphic is not stated but it seems safe to presume that it originates in the fifties or sixties as an erotic image. By using it here in this site, Lohr appropriates it by placing it in a new context. The postmodern use of graphics is typical of this site and is echoed in the combinations of different modes of femininity.

When the “linktastic” link is followed, it takes the viewer to a page of links offered from the site. The graphics on this site are taken from photographs in old cookbooks, illustrating serving suggestions. This is representative of another interest of Lohr’s – food fashions of the fifties and sixties (see the link to “Meals Men Like”). All the

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<sup>29</sup> Mouse-over is a JavaScript programming term meaning what takes place when the mouse is run over a link or a graphic.



graphics include sausages, tying in with the prominent can of “Linketts” sausages. The slogan above the brand name of the sausages is, appropriately, “Housewife’s Choice”. Next to the graphic of the can is a set of cooking and serving instructions. The yellow tag seems to be an enlarged section of the back of the can. The instructions read: “For linking at good tasting treats, it is no more fun than this peoples, all enjoyful with you”. This seems to be a satire of the stereotypical Oriental instructions on products for English export. As is typical of the Internet, one cannot be sure that the can or the instructions really exist and have not been specially created as graphics for the site. This section of the Disgruntled Housewife site emphasises the unverifiable nature of Internet representation, and also illustrates the use of intertextuality and pastiche.

The links on this site are divided into: “Girls and Women”, “Men and Boys” and “Chickclick” sites. There are about 50 links listed on this site and they are regularly changed and updated. This creates a web-environment in which the “Disgruntled Housewife” has a place. These lists and web-rings are the only ways in which the Internet is mapped and hence navigated. So this sort of listing creates a space that is navigated by users. The users can explore the sites on offer knowing that they will have a similar tone or content to “Disgruntled Housewife”. Many of the sites, other than the Chickclick sites, also belong to webrings or have their own link-pages. This creates an ever-expanding, non-linear, ‘web’ of interconnected sites. They are not only interconnected by the typed or graphic links on the pages but by the movements of the users.

Earlier in this section, I mentioned that the site’s interaction with its readers makes it particularly interesting. Several links from the “Disgruntled Housewife” homepage lead to sub-pages facilitating interaction. The “Dick List” is a list where women can list boyfriends and partners who have caused them grief. The stories create a sense of solidarity between readers and those who submitted the narratives. This is one of the many opportunities for the readers to interact with the site and make it include their own texts and narratives, making them partial authors and present online, and creating an affiliation of women.



On mouse-over the “Ask Queenie” link changes from a frazzled looking Queenie to a composed Queenie. The same graphic occurs on the top of the Queenie sub-page. It takes the form of a newspaper advert, invoking an earlier medium. It seems to mimic an advert for a pep-up tonic, but as before with the Linklet can, we cannot validate its origin or authenticity. It is in fact, a version of the ever-popular women’s advice column, once again both using and changing an older version of femininity, and creating another layer of textual reference. The purpose of an advice column of this style is usually for an expert to dispense advice for appropriate behaviour, by implication forming a model of femininity. The ironic and humorous use of this style is evident in the jingle-like paragraph under the illustration. Lohr, posing as Queenie, the expert, says: “Advice for the lovelorn, the sloppy, and the dim. Is it time to give him the boot? Feeling dull and lifeless? Always burning your roux? I am here to help.” The questions and answers are available to read, adding another source and style of narrative.

The most interactive section of “Disgruntled Housewife” is the “Country Club”, a link in the top left corner of the home page. The link is in the form of a black and white picture of fashionable fifties couples socialising, with the text “Country Club: Disgruntled Housewife’s bulletin boards”. It serves as a forum for viewers to write to each other, in a similar form to a list, discussed earlier in this chapter. It is moderated by several different people, unlike the rest of the site that is under Lohr’s control.

Some of the boards are derived from the website sub-page content. The sections of the Country Club are: Girls, Girls, Girls, 7 Deadly Sins, Play Post Office, Obsess/Consume, My Friend Television, Potluck, The Outer Limits, and the The Dick List. Most boards have a further set of sub-topics, on average about 6. Each of these sections receives hundreds of postings, indicating that the Country Club is a very active set of boards. The same people are active on several of the boards and the posters get to know each other.

An interesting feature of the Disgruntled Housewife sites is Lohr’s fascination with the female body. She discusses and represents the female body throughout the site. She uses fifties illustrations of women on the homepage, but further into the site Lohr uses photographs and text to frame women’s bodies. The way Lohr appropriates and



frames images of women's bodies is interesting as a representation of gender, as these images seem to have been intended for the male gaze. She also discusses the women's bodies in an intimate and graphic way – creating and communicating her experience of femininity, and possibly altering the way the female body is culturally constructed. As the site is very interactive, the construction and expression of femaleness is constantly in flux.

One of the most interesting sub-sites in this regard is “Naked Ladies”. The icon is an image of a woman in a frilly bra and panty. On mouse-over the bra disappears revealing her breasts and emphasising characteristics of the female body.

The most prominent feature on the “Naked Ladies” page is a black and white photograph of a naked woman from the hips up, where the white of the photograph has been replaced with a vibrant pale pink. The hairstyle, style and quality of the photographs all suggest that this too dates from the fifties. The font adds to this dated impression. The site advertises “Girls, Girls, Girls” as found above a strip club, again references to different kinds spaces where the female body is revealed. Lohr discusses her reaction to pornographic magazines, the type of bodies they display and way they display them in the subsections of this site. Lohr explains her interest as follows: “18 years later, I'm still obsessed with the naked ladies”. She speaks about collecting merchandise with pictures of naked women and says finally: “It's not lust; it's wonder.” (<http://www.disgruntledhousewife.com/naked/1naked5.html>) Lohr reframes the cultural meanings of these representations of women's bodies.

Another section of Lohr's site that explicitly deals with the body is the pregnancy sub-site. The link to the site is an icon of a pink compact. On mouse-over a circular blister pack of birth control pills is revealed. The label is, ironically, pregnancy. The sub-site again makes use of vibrant colour. The background of the site is an enlarged photograph of the inside of the womb, showing a foetus. The photo is very much enlarged and vague. It is only after looking at the background carefully that one can discern the foetus. There is a contrast between the image of birth-control pills and pregnancy on the link to the site. This type of conflicted feelings about female fertility is very evident in the title of the page, which is “The horror, the horror, the horror...” in a fleshy pink typewriter style font.



The link to the mail section is found on the homepage, and is an image of a postcard. When it is clicked and the page is entered, a pale yellow site is revealed, with another fifties illustration. It is a picture of a concerned looking man reading a letter. Above his head are lurid cursive red letters saying “Hate Mail”. The subscript is “Folks who don’t go in for this sort of thing”, which is an ironically mild prologue to the rabid hate mail stored in this site. The hate mail is organised by a small Javascript<sup>30</sup> program randomiser. The randomiser is activated when the user clicks on the “Gimme hate!” button. The hate emails that are loaded are mostly directed at Lohr, the Dick List and Pregnancy page. They indicate what a strong reaction this site provokes and many of them are aggressively opposed to the ‘feminist’ position of the site. The following excerpts illustrate these reactions:

“Why the name of your page? You do not seem to be a wife or mother. I didn't read alot of it just your stuff on pregnancy and one on strip clubs you have visited. I really cannot even figure out if you are even female. Please tell me what your page does offer! Ot was not funny or informative for housewives or anyone else. You sound like my lesbian sister in law. Which do you hate more, men, chldren or yourself?”

“Listen Here Bitch, You and all your feminist buddies need to get their stuff together and get themselves back in the kitchen, 'cause you are liabled to get slapped by a real man. When you do get what is due, you will fall down and learn the hard way that feminism is a disease for the weak-minded and bored complainers in this world. Feel Free To List Me On Your Dick List As:Woman Nizer”

“It is apparent from your writing that you are suffering from a repressed longing for and jealousy of pregnancy, much in the way homophobia expresses itself, with an abnormally extreme repulsion (professed). Have a good day.”

The way in which Lohr complicates cultural representations of femaleness has clearly threatened and offended many readers of the site. If the hate mail is representative of the readers of the site, it seems as if a large proportion of men are also viewing *Disgruntled Housewife*. This is unexpected, as it is mainly linked to women’s interest sites and web-rings.

The audience of *Disgruntled Housewife* is significant as it influences the way this site can be theorised in terms of feminist theory. There is no information on the profile of

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<sup>30</sup> Javascript is a simple programming language for webpages.



the viewer and this information would be practically impossible to accurately obtain. The links to other websites hence become an important way of determining the function and users of the site. Do these links represent the kind of political affinity suggested by Harraway in her “Cyborg’s Manifesto”?

As discussed in Chapter 1 and earlier in this section, Harraway’s cyborg feminism is based on affinity and not on biological essentialism. The Disgruntled Housewife site, however, places a strong focus on both affinity and the biological and physical elements of the female body. Significantly, the type of feminism performed on this site does not seem to be based fundamentally on the possession of the female body, but rather the cultural and social experiences of female bodies. This distinction can be seen in the Naked Ladies section which is about the cultural experience of female nudity, but can also be seen in the section about pregnancy. The Pregnancy pages are not fundamentally about having a reproductive female body but rather about the encultured meanings of being a “breeder”.

The focus is on the interpretation of femaleness. Lohr tries to isolate and re-assemble elements of femininity in a new way. She attempts to transgress the cultural boundaries and limits placed on the female body. This is done through establishing affinity.

The affinities are firstly created through the prominent links to other female focus web-rings. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it is achieved through the multiple narratives on the site. By layering all these voices and stories, different and simultaneous spaces of femininity are created.

The bulletin boards are a good example of this. By initiating these narratives and creating this space, Lohr’s site allows multiple versions of female experience to intermingle.

Unlike Harraway’s suggestion of an emancipating departure from the female body in the cyborg expression of identity, these women use this virtual space to try to reconstruct embodied female identities online.



### **Virtual Bodies : Ananova**

The website, [www.ananova.com](http://www.ananova.com), is a news dissemination site developed by the BBC. Ananova differs from the generic web-news-site by including the option of having the news read by an animated newsreader. The only presence of Ananova is the picture of her next to the page name. It is a small circle with containing the portrait of Ananova with the word “video”, followed by the play symbol, below it. The whole picture and the text are one link and on mouse-over, the tag “video reports” is displayed.

When this link is clicked, a small square window pops up. The window contains a grey metallic frame with a black, blank screen centre which looks like an off television screen. Below the screen, there are two round buttons. They, like the earlier play button, look like three-dimensional buttons found on electronic equipment like a television and a remote control.

Ananova appears on the screen mimicking a television broadcast. She appears from the shoulders up, against a royal blue background. She addresses the viewer by looking straight ahead and speaks in a slightly monotonous, computer-generated, female voice. She introduces herself, advertises the uniqueness of this site, and offers the user a choice of news broadcasts.

The newscasts are short, lasting less than a minute, and Ananova barely moves her head as she speaks. She does change her facial expressions to fit the tag placed on the news-story by the journalists. Her mouth moves to mimic the forming of the words by a real mouth. The voice-streaming program gives priority to the sounds that come continuously without much delay. The “heavier” video stream has a lower priority and the consequence is that the voice and video are often out of sync. Frequently, the video stops and freezes on an image, while the voice continues.

Ananova’s creators say that they intend to develop the site further, including full body newscasts. They express this through Ananova, letting her say: “Streaming video being what it is today there's not much point in me waving my arm and legs around. So my designers have concentrated so far on my face. I do have arms, legs and an entire body, but you'll have to wait a while yet before you see me striding around a



news set or presenting live from locations around the world.” She answers many more common questions about herself on

<http://www.ananova.com/video/epk/epk.html?language=english>. These questions almost all relate to her body.

These questions and answers do not deal with the more subtle complexities raised by this representation of a female body. The creators of Ananova have tried to make Ananova as real as possible by making her speak of herself in the first person. Although she speaks of herself as an artificial creation her “presence” on the screen as she answers questions, negates this claim. This curious faking of reality prevails through this medium.

Although her gender is described as functional, she is perceived in gendered and sexual terms. An example of this when she is asked how she feels about being seen as a “babe” and she says: “As a super-intelligent computer it intrigues me that so many people think of me as a babe. I’ve got more in common with Hal from 2001 than Lara Croft from Tomb Raider. Still, my human colleagues tell me that looks are important so if I was capable of human emotions I’m sure I’d be flattered.” The perception of Ananova as a babe assumes an embodied, gendered, identity.

Instead, Ananova is an example of virtual gender. The owner of the gender has no offline body. Ananova’s gender has no biological materiality. It cannot have any fundamental base in essentialism because it is no more than a hollow representation. Yet, Ananova deliberately fakes the possession of a body and the claim on materiality that follows from this claim. This paradox is a form of faking that will perhaps become more and more frequent on the Internet. It is a strange form of faking because it is not a simulacrum. The animated virtual body is still very clearly distinguishable from video streaming of “real” bodies.

The mere presence of the virtual body is a form of faking because it is claiming to be more than a hollow shell. The relationship between this hollow virtual body is extended to a dialectic relationship between gender and corporality by Cristina Demaria and Antonella Mascio in “Little women grow up”. They describe these new virtual bodies as “rigid and firm; every trace of vulnerability, softness and humidity



has been banished. If, in the various metaphysical examples of the body, there exists a division between a soft, fluid and liquid female body and a hard, organised, phallic body devoid of a womb – a body-machine – videogame heroines would definitely appear to favour the latter type.”

(<http://www.women.it/quarta/workshops/laracroft5/demariamascio.htm>) By perceiving these bodies sexually as a “babes” are users showing a post-structuralism attitude to technology on which the machine is not necessarily associated with the masculine? Alternatively, is the faking of the possession of a body frighteningly persuasive? It seems that female virtual bodies are changing the way technology is perceived. Ananova has been described by Sheryl Hamilton in Virtual Gender or Virtually Gendered as the most simplistic forms of virtual gendering, which she labels as “pixelated boobs”. Her performance of gendered identity is definitely secondary to her function to transmitting information. But she is defiantly female.

So these virtual characters, like Ananova, do not merely fake a gender they cannot posses, through this claim they also fake the possession of internal organs covered by flesh that is in opposition to their machine nature. By speaking and showing the interior of the mouth, the inside of the body is once again suggested. The owner of the voice should have lungs and vocal cords, a tongue and teeth to be able to make the sounds she makes.

A further complication of the body is that this is the ‘word made flesh’ – the computer program is another form of the text of the site. It is text transformed into a body, not mediated by a body. Instead of being the body that writes it is the written body. This situation arises from an extreme form of the text as presence and identity. On the homepages, discussed earlier, the textual contents of the sites were the only online representation and presence of the offline gendered embodied identity. In this case, there is no offline body and the text has to pretend to be all.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown a variety of ways in which computer representation can function. The possibilities of representation differ in the various Internet media, and



representation will continue to change rapidly as computer technology advances. This chapter has isolated several common characteristics of Internet representation.

Online representation is unstable because it is unverifiable and can be misrepresentative. This chapter has focused attention on websites, whose text are made up of combinations of images, texts and photographs and links. These representations are made up of multimedia texts referring to many forms and sources outside of the website. The way these texts refer to other texts and sources is very similar to Barthes notions of intertextuality or Derrida's idea of assemblage.

These texts, particularly in the case of the homepages, are used to establish online presence. The analysis of the homepages shows that these pages are very tightly linked to their offline authors. This is particularly evident in the use of photographs. The use of photographs and references to the body show how tightly the concept of identity, even virtual identity, is linked to the concept of the body. This is in contrast to the idea that the self merely exists on the substrate of the material body.

The offline body intrudes onto the web-pages in the form of the virtual body. Where the material body is undeniable proof of presence, and by extension identity, the virtual body consists of images of the offline body and any other text that pretend to reference the body to create a sense of presence. These texts can be misrepresentation and are characterised by the same instability described earlier. The existence of virtual bodies without material bodies, like Ananova, destabilise the virtual body and thus identity further.

These web-pages interact with each other and their parent site by sharing and manipulating common texts. This interaction can perhaps be conceptualised as a type of narrative. These narratives do not only function to represent the self but also create the self by writing it into being, as discussed in Chapter 1.

How are these representational characteristics represented by film? The Internet challenges many aspects of postmodern theories of identity and representation. The next chapter will show that film does not always choose to represent the Internet accurately and that these misrepresentations are very revealing.



## Chapter 3: Imagining Technology: Film Images

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The focus of this chapter is the way popular commercial films reflect the medium of computer-mediated communication and construct cultural relationships with technology. The films Johnny Mnemonic, Matrix, Hackers, and You've Got Mail were intended primarily for entertainment and were meant to entice and reflect audience's fantasies and fears about the Internet and email. The analysis of these films will show the how the Internet is represented and will discuss how this affects the way technology is conceptualised. The films also raise many of the same issues as the analyses of the web-pages in the previous chapter, and it will be questioned how the film representations alter the ways in which identity and representation are understood.

It is significant that the films are much more widely viewed than the computer technology they discuss, as many audiences cannot afford email or Internet but do watch films and videos. The films that I will be focussing on have been widely marketed and distributed. This means that although these films represent the relationship between people and machines, and the effect this has on contemporary culture, they do of course construct the subject matter they supposedly reflect in very particular ways. The image they present may have particular power and influence in third world countries, where this may be the viewer's first and often only exposure to computer mediated communication. As with web-pages, films interpret Internet media but also interact with it. I will show that these media do not stand alone but keep feeding into each other.

As discussed in the Introduction, there is a strong interaction between the mediums of film and the Internet. This interaction is shaping and changing understandings of identity and representation. I will suggest that the medium of film easily expresses otherwise subconscious fears and desires through its explicitly constructed narratives. These narratives necessarily distort reality through their techniques and the limited time span of a film. The discussion to follow will examine the way in which these



films represent and misrepresent computer-mediated communication and how this challenges theoretical assumptions about the body, gender, identity and representation.

Apart from “Matrix” these films were not critically well received, and were often not box-office successes. My interest in these films is not in how successful they are as a cinematic art-form, but rather what they say as cultural artefacts. I will look at the type of narratives these films use to discuss cyberspace and the Internet. The films selected for analysis have adapted other popular narratives, like the thriller in Hackers, the love story in You’ve Got Mail and the cyberpunk-style narratives in Johnny Mnemonic and Matrix. Often these narratives do not realistically represent the online experience and the effect it has on offline life. As discussed in the previous chapter, You’ve Got Mail is a good example of this.

The selection and order of films discussed show a marked development in the way Internet technology is represented. Johnny Mnemonic, an attempt to create a cyberpunk film from William Gibson’s cyberpunk literature from the eighties, has been seen as a ‘failure’ by some critics who ascribe this to the incompatibility of the science-fiction literature to the film medium. Others have blamed the technological advance in ten years, claiming that the film naturalises technology that Gibson saw as fantastical. There have been some arguments that suggest that film, as a primarily representative medium, cannot successfully portray cyberspace and virtual reality, as these concepts rely on altered understandings of space and time.

Hackers seems to continue the trend of integrating technology into everyday life by creating a thriller set in the subculture of teenage hackers. By using this subculture the film situates these computer users and their machines on the margin but contrasts this with the teenager’s otherwise normal domestic life. As will be discussed in this section, the film not only intentionally constructs the technology the teenagers use, but also hacker sub-culture. This is done to create a visually more exciting film, but is a good example of Hollywood’s appropriation of technology and its cultures. In You’ve Got Mail the laptops and their software are made to seem like a normal extension of offline life, and the computer is cast as a domestic tool in the luxurious Manhattan apartments. Matrix, the most recent of the films I look at, seems to once



again return to the type of science-fiction cyberpunk project attempted in Johnny Mnemonic. The success of this film could be attributed to the more abstract, stylised production and more sophisticated narrative. There does however seem to be a tendency to appropriate the threatening discourse of the machine as “Other”, and control it by reframing it in film.

This process of appropriation and control of the machine seems to follow its own narrative. Initially computer mediated communication belonged to the realm of science fiction and later more specifically cyberpunk fiction. Cyberpunk is more specifically interested in the effect virtual reality and computer technology has on futuristic cultures. As discussed above, both Johnny Mnemonic and Matrix, could be seen as cyberpunk films, depicting technology ambiguously and as Other. This can be seen in the way technology is depicted in both Johnny Mnemonic and Matrix. All the characters in the films use technology but a distinction is made between the high-tech multinational corporate networks and the lo-techs in Johnny Mnemonic; and the artificial intelligence agents and the free citizens of Zion in the Matrix. Technology is seen as potentially controlling and threatening to identity. Even the boundaries of the body are seen to be challenged and threatened, as will be discussed further shortly.

As the personal computer became a more common household item the depiction of computer technology changed. The users still had to have specific knowledge and skills not possessed by most people, and were hence depicted as a subculture. This is confirmed by the many studies on communities, as discussed in Chapter Two, at the same time. While theorists were constructing email, list and chat-room users as particular communities, films were constructing them as sub-cultures, still at the margin because of their interactions with machines. As discussed above, a movement into the domestic sphere started to happen in Hackers and was perhaps completed in a film like You’ve Got Mail. The computers are now situated within the home but the relationship with technology is still mistrustful. Once again it is clear that technology can be an aid but is potentially dangerous when in the wrong hands. In Johnny Mnemonic, multinational corporations are seen to control much of the information conveyed through computers and the availability of this information can violate the individual’s privacy. The vulnerability of information on computer systems is frequently illustrated by the presence of the virus and the hacker. Both the concepts,



viruses and hackers, are a space where human and machine interact intimately, and the films represent this interaction critically. In Matrix a virus takes the form of a biological organism that infiltrates the body. In Johnny Mnemonic the combination of the data, hardware and biology are seen as pathological. The hacker walks a fine line between the controller and the saboteur, and is treated with great mistrust by the government in Hackers.

In You've Got Mail the computer is almost invisible as the machine-Other. It is used seamlessly as a domestic tool and the film tries to avoid noticing the role technology plays, instead focussing on the developing romance between the main characters. Once again the computer network is associated with large corporate entities like AOL, but unlike in Hackers, Johnny Mnemonic and even the Matrix, this film is not critical of these affiliations. This is significant as it both indicates the complete merging of the computer into domestic life, and the denial of the many ways in which computer-mediated communication affects offline life. It would be interesting to know whether this lack of awareness is particular to this film or due to the normalisation of this technology. Does this reflect the way in which people use chat-rooms, email and the Internet, or is it a reflection of this film's conservative narrative, which seems to be uninterested in the political and social implications of technology?

In this chapter I intend to investigate this changing perception and reflection of technology. I want to see how this influences the way in which identity gender and the body are represented. I interrogate the film narratives and compare them to the Internet narratives. I then suggest that both of these sets of narratives change the way we theorise identity and bodies, and that through the performance of these narratives, in film and on the Internet, postmodern theories of representation and identity, come to be questioned.

Do these representations of representation give a 'crystallised' and exaggerated perspective? How does the way the films represent online identity and representation compare with and reflect critical theory regarding technology, gender and identity? These films all deal with man-machine interaction. How does this relate to Haraway's "Cyborg"? Do they represent the information-focussed posthuman tendencies Hayles speaks of? How do these films reflect the broader theories of



postmodernism and post-structuralism? Do elements in these films, particularly the “Matrix”, conform to Baudrillard’s descriptions of simulacra? All of these questions are taken up in some form below.

### **Johnny Mnemonic**

Johnny Mnemonic was released in 1996, at roughly the same time as the ‘html’ pages<sup>1</sup> and browsers were developed and released, and the Internet took on the face we know. Although a much criticised, superficial and unremarkable film, it contained many of the themes and techniques soon to become popular.

Gibson wrote the screenplay for this film and the plot is roughly the same as his short story. Johnny has had a memory implant put in his brain so that he is able to work as a computer data courier. He is now ready to retire and wants to recover his memory. To pay for this expensive procedure he needs to make one last run, transferring stolen Pharmacom data from Beijing to Newark.

Johnny is unable to access the information in his brain and only the recipient of the code can remove it. The fax transfer of the code is interrupted by the Yakuza, a crime syndicate employed by Pharmacom to prevent the information transfer. After a shoot-out Johnny escapes and goes to Newark hoping to remove the data quickly as he has been overloaded and, unless he acts, will die within 24 hours.

It becomes clear that Johnny is carrying the cure for NAS, Nerve Attenuation Syndrome, an illness afflicting millions, caused by interaction with machines. The several factions of the Yakuza are trying to decapitate Johnny to prevent the cure becoming available to the public. With the assistance of Jane, Johnny finds his way to Heaven, the Lotech headquarters. Here the cyborg dolphin, Jones, helps Johnny hack the information out of his brain and the Lo-techs broadcast it to the world.

Johnny Mnemonic associates technology with the Other, and an example of this is the use and appropriation of Eastern (in this case Japanese) culture. The film makes use

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<sup>1</sup> A type of web-page discussed in detail in the previous chapter.



of the soon to be very popular ‘anime’ cartoons and uses a stylised violence associated with this style of animation. The film links the Oriental Other with the technological Other. This functions as a metaphor, allowing the tensions and conflict associated with technology to be associated with the distrust and fascination with the East. In this way the narratives of mistrust of technology are associated with earlier dramatisations and narratives of the Other. Another version of this narrative is located in the representation of the “lo-techs” as the western individuals fighting against globalised capitalism.

The representation of the Oriental Other is linked to gender, and the understanding of femininity. Anime usually portrays women as child-like and in pornographic anime they are always the passive element. Yet in “Johnny Mnemonic” both genders are augmented by technology but women and transvestites use these augmentations to become bodyguards of men. This suggests that becoming a cyborg can emancipate women, and men, from traditional roles, but the film goes on to suggest that the coupling with the machine is deadly. This is perhaps a subtle assertion against this suggested emancipation.

The futuristic representation of the Internet is revealing, as it sees the Internet becoming increasingly immersive and it links the user interface with the whole body, again suggesting a cyborg coupling. The film is set in 2021 and takes place offline in Beijing, China and Newark, New Jersey, but much of the important action occurs in cyberspace.

Cyberspace is described by Gibson in Neuromancer as: “A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding....” (<http://www.spe.sony.com/movies/johnnymnemonic/09exclsv.html>) This description provided a powerful challenge to the film production team. They claim that instead of expanding on what the Internet and virtual reality looked like in 1996, they “visualize[d] it as a rich, high resolution, superfast medium.” The production crew



further predicted that “technology will follow fiction, and as VR<sup>2</sup> is perceived on film, so may it very well come to be.” (Ibid) This comment once again emphasises the strong interaction between film and technology, and supports the idea that film representations of the Internet shape the way the media is conceptualised.

The film representation of the Internet significantly adds a third dimension to cyberspace. As the above quote suggests, the producers of *Johnny Mnemonic* saw virtual reality technology as becoming an important part of cyberspace. Virtual reality is created when a user can manipulate three-dimensional objects in a three-dimensional electronic environment. The Internet is a more abstract structure of interconnected data files, which can be exchanged, altered and attacked by viruses. All the films to be discussed in this chapter attempt to animate and dramatise the Internet in some way in order to make it more dynamic and exciting. By creating a three-dimensional representation of cyberspace, the spatial qualities of virtual reality are combined with the information processing characteristics of the Internet.

The effect is a dynamic space that functions as an alternative world where the characters can interact. This is very significant as it creates a more immersive environment that demands a fuller interaction with the offline body than the websites discussed in Chapter 2. This merges the offline body with a virtual body in the manipulation of cyberspace, as will be shown below.

Johnny manipulates the cyberspace environment through virtual reality interface tools like the data gloves. Instead of typing in keystrokes at a computer terminal, he clothes himself in a visor and gloves, and enters cyberspace. As the film perspective shifts from viewing Johnny, to his perspective, we see that the data-gloves become his cyberspace hands, parts of a virtual body, with which he manipulates information.

The animation of information has an important effect in the film. It gives information like telephone numbers or file systems a three-dimensional space and by doing this embodies them as biological entities and architectural structures. This obviously

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<sup>2</sup> VR is an abbreviation of virtual reality. A definition of virtual reality will follow in the next paragraph.



relates to Gibson's vision of cyberspace as looking like "city lights", an urban spatial metaphor. This representation of the Internet is similar to the Hackers representation.

By creating an alternative space for action in which information is expanded to a three-dimensional representation, people (and their hands), are reduced to animated data. This construction implies two almost contradictory ideas. On the one hand the body is reduced to the virtual body which only consists of information, and does not need a material substrate. This would confirm Hayles' fear of the posthuman age. But on the other hand the information is embodied. Although it is only virtual embodiment, there is still a 'fake' referral to offline embodiment, as was discussed in the previous chapter in reference to *Ananova*. This reference to embodiment creates presence and makes the information seem more 'real', more 'there'.

The embodiment of information and the reduction of the body to the virtual body starts to blur the boundaries between pure information and biological organisms, and this is one of the main themes the film attempts to explore. A range of embodied identities is represented, from Johnny, whose job is to be a receptacle of information, to Anna, who only exists online as information. This also introduces a different kind of cyborg, the virtually embodied entity is still part organic part-machine, and challenges the conception of the body as material. As much of the film's action takes place in cyberspace, most of the action and suspense depends on the speed at which information is accessed and manipulated. This changes the way we understand the way we travel and move.

The opening sequence of *Johnny Mnemonic* situates the viewer in the Internet in 2021 and is a good example of the way the film depicts this futuristic cyberspace. In the title shot a two-dimensional representation is immediately transformed into a three-dimensional image as the title dissolves into specks of light and blue structural lines overlay the black background. The specks of light become representative of bundles of data travelling along the pathways of the Internet. The camera tracks several of these light balls of data, simulating the virtual reality experience of moving through a three-dimensional virtual environment. As the viewer moves along, it is as if the earlier blue grid was an aerial view, and the camera now descends into a "city



of light” and data. The abstract designs give the atmosphere of city buildings at night and words are visible like neon signs. Words like “Pharmacom” and oriental symbols indicate the global capitalist network the film depicts.

The camera then starts to follow one ball of light that expands into a larger ball of constantly changing numbers and letters. This data accelerates until the surrounding structures only appear as a tunnel. This gives the impression of extreme speed, which is very important to the manipulation of cyberspace. The ball of light transforms into a mirror image of Johnny’s wakeup message. The blue screen of the wakeup message is now reflected of Johnny’s right eye in a close-up shot. This is the first indication that Johnny is closely integrated with the technology surrounding him. The eye is, as always, symbolic both of the “I” and the mode of vision; Johnny is augmented by technology, and can see and manipulate his way around the Internet.

The representation of the Internet in the opening scene is passive in the sense that although the audience is there as observer, there is no human intervention in the flow of the Internet. Later, in the scene where Johnny goes online from Crazy Bob’s Computer Shop, while trying to escape the Yakuza, the user-interface is depicted. This scene begins with Johnny “suited up” in virtual reality equipment. Through the data gloves and visor he manipulates the Internet. There is no conventional computer equipment like a monitor or keyboard and Johnny’s online movements are an extension of his offline movements.

As he logs onto a network we start to see the Internet from his perspective. Like in the opening scene of the film the camera rushes down a tunnel, suggesting extreme speed. As Johnny lifts his hands he halts the movement and we see an image of the Internet as a blue grid of geometric structures against a black background. The perspective switches between Johnny’s perspective of the Internet and viewing him offline. This allows the viewer to see how the virtual reality equipment works. The data-gloves are an important tool in allowing Johnny to perform his presence online. To enter information structures like the Beijing Hotel database Johnny grips the globe, unfolds it and locates the hotel. To gain access the three-dimensional objects



are rotated and unpacked. As previously mentioned, this gives the data substance and makes these virtual structures appear real and solid, as solid as Johnny's virtual hands. By using floor plans and diagrams the language of architecture is invoked, again suggesting the urban reality of cyberspace.

The themes of the hacker and the virus are also prominent in Johnny Mnemonic. The Yakuza are able to track Johnny's movements online and offline, indicating his lack of privacy and showing that he is always visible, online and off. When the Yakuza discover Johnny's location they infect him with a computer virus. This has the effect that his view of the Internet dissolves as the virus devours the data visible to him. The idea of controlling and sabotaging information through the use of a virus program is also discussed in some of the other films, particularly Hackers. The virus is based on an organic model, and shows how unstable computer data is. As the virus makes Johnny's view go black, Anna appears to him like a vision. She is the founder of Pharmacom and was downloaded into the Internet. Anna, an entity existing only in cyberspace, seems to have the greatest hacking ability and mobility.

The film ends on a scene in which Johnny has to remove the data from his brain. To release the data he needs to find the last pictorial element of the code. Jones who was augmented by the military to break codes, assists Johnny. Johnny is plugged into a headset linked to the tower of televisions, satellite broadcasts and Jones, a cyborg dolphin.

As Johnny gets ready to enter the computer networks through which he will attempt to hack into his brain, the camera zooms in and focuses on his mouth and teeth, the only part of his face now visible. This is effective because it reminds the viewer of the shots of Johnny downloading the data in the beginning, when the camera also focussed on his clenched teeth. The clenched teeth are symbolic of exertion and pain and by showing the viewer the inside of Johnny's mouth the camera is exposing his bodily vulnerability, which will soon be contrasted with the vulnerabilities and strengths of his virtual body.



As Johnny enters cyberspace, his perspective is visible on the towers of television screens. The sequence of entering cyberspace is much like the opening scene discussed earlier. Instead of Johnny merely manipulating cyberspace through virtual hands controlled by data-gloves, he now creates a full virtual self to negotiate his mind and cyberspace. His virtual form is made of semi-translucent simple geometric shapes that can stretch and separate. Although the virtual body does resemble Johnny it is not realistic and is clearly in the style of computer animation. Interestingly it is quite different from Anna, who has to some extent retained her offline appearance although in a translucent blue form.

As Johnny descends into cyberspace he stretches into a beam of light travelling down a tunnel. This indicates that although his appearance is embodied, it actually has no substance and can transform into information and change shapes. This again conforms to Hayles' theory that information is increasingly seen as disconnected from matter and shape. This film seems to suggest a complicated relationship between matter and data. Johnny can move around online in any form but this online embodiment is still closely linked to his offline body, as is evident from the frequent shots of his contorted face in the VR mask.

As Johnny enters his destination in cyberspace he becomes visible as a cut-out on a two-dimensional black block. From this outline he is assembled from loose geometric shapes into a shiny, computer-animated Johnny. As Pharmacom becomes aware of his presence they send out an intruder alert and the cyberspace environment changes from a blue shade to an angry orange with red hazard triangles. Johnny proceeds to replicate himself, to create a foil for the virus. This creates three versions of Johnny at that moment, two online and one off. As the virus destroys the copy, offline Johnny seems to feel the discomfort, again suggesting that online identity is inextricably linked to the offline body.

Once Johnny has evaded the Pharmacom virus he is able to start searching for the final element of the code to free his mind from the information trapped there. A virtual form of Jones, the cyborg dolphin, joins him. The cyborg dolphin is in real life



a pale green-grey colour and his robotic implants are visible all over his body. In cyberspace, however, he appears as a natural dolphin in warm rainbow colours, swimming freely to Johnny. Cyber-Johnny leans forward and grips a structure of lines and lights and seems to cut a chunk free. This piece of data is stretched into a sheet and slowly the image of Anna appears on it. This face is the last image of the download code and the Pharmacom logo becomes visible on the televisions at Heaven, the Lotech headquarters. Johnny can now see a grid representation of his brain and we see the data rushing upwards out of the brain as the data is downloaded. This data is reconfigured as images, words and numbers transmitted to television screens around the world.

Particularly in this last scene the film seems to represent a variety of relationships between bodies and matter. As discussed earlier, the film seems to present a continuum from offline embodiment to online bodies. Johnny can exist in up to three forms simultaneously. All these manifestations of Johnny originate in his offline presence but can each separately function as Johnny. Similarly the dolphin, Jones, also functions in two states. There are important differences in the representations of the online and offline identities, as is discussed above. What is interesting is that despite the romance the film has with the malleable form of online identities and data, the ending is still fundamentally about restoring the world to its 'natural' form, free of NAS.

The data stuck in Johnny's brain is the cure for NAS. It will help restore all the cyborgs and techno-maligned to regain 'natural', healthy, functioning, bodies. Making the cure available for free also destroys the 'unnatural' economic hold that Pharmacom has over the world.

In Johnny Mnemonic several dialectic oppositions are negotiated. The conflict in between humans and machines, and male and female, are illustrated by Johnny, the cyborg; and the transvestites and female body guards, augmented by technology, versus the males they protect. The cyborg, intelligent, dolphin challenges the human and animal boundaries. Ironically, the negative poles of each of these combinations are represented as abnormal or altered. The film strives to make them like the



‘normal’ positive pole. The film imagines the existence of the ‘natural’ body and the ‘natural’ society in opposition to technology. As suggested in Chapter 1, the ‘natural’ is an artificial construct that emphasises a dialectical view of technology.

The film seems anxious about giving up the idea of the “natural” or the “normal”. So despite its willingness to negotiate some binary oppositions, it still has some investments in returning to the familiar, the normal. These anxieties fundamentally limit the intellectual scope of the film. It is not interested in overstepping the boundaries. It intends to impress and entertain without challenging the audience’s basic assumptions about the natural.

This film dramatises the structure of the Internet by making it three-dimensional. Virtual bodies connected to their offline material bodies through VR equipment can manipulate this three-dimensional structure. This challenges the boundaries of the material body. The creation of online presence is again linked to offline embodiment, even if this suggestion is a misrepresentation. The film pretends to expand representations of gender from the traditional roles, but by linking this expansion to technology fundamentally declares these variations ‘unnatural’.

The film uses several different techniques to dramatise these issues and imports earlier narratives to create a narrative of the Internet. This narrative is still characterised by binary thought and does not free itself from the constraints of the offline embodied world.

### **Hackers**

The film, Hackers, has been chosen because it depicts computer use as part of a youth sub-culture, moving the machine away from the margin and closer to the centre. It also dramatises computer-interface in an interesting and revealing way. Like Johnny Mnemonic, it parallels the city with cyberspace and misrepresents computer interfaces to create a visually more exciting film. Its status as cult film, despite its technical and cultural inaccuracies, also makes it interesting.



This analysis will firstly focus on the narratives employed by the film, questioning whether new narratives of technology are created. It will then look at the way the hacker sub-culture of computer users is misrepresented, arguing that this shows a lack of interest in the diversity of computer culture. It will be shown, instead, that the film ‘normalises’ this subculture by making it part of offline youth culture. Finally a detailed textual analysis of the representation of the Internet as three-dimensional urban space will be undertaken. It will be demonstrated in this section and the section on You’ve Got Mail, that film is starting to develop fixed metaphors for the representation of the Internet, but not of its users.

Hackers reveals the use of several well-known narratives in relation to ‘technology’. It is set in New York in the early nineties and the main characters are a group of high school students. Dade Murphy, a juvenile hacker, arrives at his new school, meets Kate Libby and they embark upon a competitive relationship and romance. The competition between Dade, aka Crash Override, and Kate, aka Acid Burn, is the narrative of an adolescent romance. As in You’ve Got Mail, computer technology is prominent in the love story. This is deceptive because despite its title, it is not a narrative about technology, and the computers are merely props.

Dade meets Phantom Phreak, who introduces him to the other members of the hacker group. To prove that he is a member of this group, Joey tries to hack into a super-computer called a Gibson, belonging to the oil company, Ellington Mineral. This is an example of another common narrative to be discussed below.

Eugene Belford, an employee of Ellington, has written a computer program, called a worm, to steal money from the company. Joey downloads this file and Belford traces his call. He contacts the NAS and claims that Joey has planted the virus.

Fearing that Joey may have passed the information on to others who would discover his plan, Belford ensures that all Joey’s friends are placed under surveillance. When Kate and the others are in trouble, and about to be arrested, Dade helps them despite his earlier decision not to become involved.



They enlist the help of Razor and Blade, who transmit a hacker television channel. They call on “hackers of the world [to] unite” and attack the Ellington computer. Dade and friends are arrested but in the nick of time Razor and Blade take over all the television stations and Belford’s scheme is exposed. This part of the plot shows how the media of the Internet is seen to be spreading to and interacting with other media like the telephone and television.

The title seems to indicate the focus of the film. By naming the film “Hackers”, the producers caused offence to the hacker community who distinguish between hacking and cracking. This neologism indicates the hackers’ disapproval of vandalism and theft practised by crackers. The film keeps classifying all sorts of different behaviours and groups under the blanket category “hacking”. This is a misleading and an inaccurate representation of a subculture of computer user, and indicates a lack of interest in online culture and the group identity of a large group of Internet users. References by Eugene Bellford to himself as a “samurai” or “cowboy”, are examples of misrepresentation of this cultural group. The term “Samurai” refers to “A hacker who hires out for legal cracking jobs... they have modeled themselves explicitly on the historical samurai of Japan” (The Jargon File) which indicates another link between the manipulation of technology and the Oriental Other. “Net cowboys” refers to Gibson’s novels, and suggests cyberspace is a frontier. These terms refer to a strict code of conduct quite opposite to how Belford is represented in the film.

The code of conduct adhered to by most hackers is famously called the “Hacker Manifesto” and in the film it is ironically read to the viewer by the NAS government agent watching Joey’s apartment. The Manifesto is an important part of Internet culture and reads as follows:

This is our world now, the world of the electron and the switch, the beauty of the baud. We make use of a service already existing without paying for what could be dirt-cheap if it weren't run by profiteering gluttons, and you call us animals. We explore - and you call us criminals. We seek after knowledge - and you call us criminals. We exist without skin color, without nationality, without religious bias - and you call us criminals. You build atomic bombs, you wage wars, you murder, cheat, and lie to us and try to make us believe it is for our own good - yet we are the criminals. Yes, I am a criminal. My crime is that of curiosity. My crime is that of judging people by what they say and think, not what they look like. My crime is that of outsmarting



you, something that you will never forgive me for. I am a hacker, and this is my manifesto. You may stop me, but you can't stop us all. (<http://ouray.cudenver.edu/~bsorlic/Final.html>)

This film barely uses this manifesto despite its proclaimed interest in representing these computer users. This manifesto is significant in terms of the cultural study of Internet identity. It is one of the few 'political' statements of online culture and shows the potential of online group identities based on affinity.

One of the main flaws of this film is its inability, or lack of interest in representing the complexity of these computer users, instead presenting a group of competitive teenagers in music video style. The film reduces this online subculture to a manifestation of general 'youth-culture'. Instead of engaging with the heterogeneous expressions of identity found in different youth sub-culture movements, and on the Internet, this film combines them into an all-inclusive "Youth Culture". Heavy metal music, body piercing, alternative fashion, and hacking all become part of the trendy image the film presents. The film performs a common Hollywood simplification by reducing the complexities of subcultures and diverse online and offline identities to a monolithic 'youth-culture'. The claim that hacker identities and culture are merely extensions of offline culture can also be seen as a denial of the complexity of online life.

Instead of being dominated by an alternative set of ethics described in the manifesto, the main drive of the film's subculture is the need to belong to an "in-crowd" offline. This is evident in several of the films narratives. The sub-plot of Joey, the novice, is a good example. In Joey's first scene he enters saying: "I need a handle. I don't have an identity till I have a handle." This does draw the attention to the importance of the handle or nick in online identity, as discussed in Chapter 2, but also creates a sort of parallel with ritualised forms of identity making. Joey is not yet a full member of the group and so he does not yet have a name. He must still undergo a type of initiation. Cereal Killer tells him he needs to perform a "righteous hack" before he can become "elite", a member of the in-crowd. This older narrative is combined with technology but again as with the love story narrative, the technology merely serves as a prop. No new narratives of technology are established.



The film is very visually orientated as is suggested by the use of clothing and the music video style flashes of random association. Kate frequently wears clothes with an Eastern influence, for example a kimono. As in Johnny Mnemonic, the Eastern influence seems to be associated with technology and in this case femininity. Kate's eye make up at times also mimics eastern features. A good example of this Eastern techno-fashion can be found in the representation of Razor and Blade.

The film also draws a visual metaphor between cyberspace and the city, in this case New York. One of the main ways this metaphor is achieved is through the use of music. A good example of this is a scene early in the film that starts when Dade's mother says: "You will like it here, this is the city that never sleeps". The camera zooms in to the city skyline and the camera movement mimics that of a computer game. The colours start to change into tones of blue and grey, a clue that this is about to morph into a representation of cyberspace.

The buildings change into a line structure, and the background becomes dark blue. The image reduces in density as the buildings become translucent and the streets change into circuit boards. The metamorphosis of this urban space into a digital space indicates the way Dade sees urban structures. The city is seen as housing data, not people, and the film has a pre-occupation with the way in data moves through these spaces. The city is seen as a shell for information and an analogy is drawn between this, and the way computer hardware houses software and information. Comparing cyberspace to an urban space, particularly a city, is surprisingly common. This film performs the metaphor both ways, comparing the city to cyberspace, and cyberspace to the city.

This metaphor is extended from the title shot into the film. One of the main vehicles for this metaphor is transport. Dade arrives in an aeroplane as he sees the city for the first time, in the above-described scene. The hackers use roller-blades and skateboards to navigate their way through the city. Routes do not bind these forms of transportation, as they can use the sidewalk or the streets, and can circumvent traffic jams. This is shown when the hackers go to Grand Central Station near the end of the film, while the NAS agents are stuck in the traffic jam the hackers created. This moment in the film shows a clear comparison between the way the hackers can



manipulate data and how it moves, and their physical freedom of movement. This visual metaphor also links the travel of the embodied user with movement of data. The conflict between the embodied body and the disembodied data is not critically expressed, and they are used as symbols for each other. The atmosphere created by this freedom of movement, both through cyberspace and the real city, is intoxicating and euphoric. This atmosphere is once again created through the choice of music and the pulsating shifts in screen shots.

The frequent depiction of modes of transport also emphasises the need for speed of data movement in cyberspace. This is seen by the comparison of circuits with streets and by the fact that the final showdown takes place at Grand Central Station, a place of transit.

The analysis of the representation of the cyberspace and software is, as always, revealing. As in The Matrix there is a lot of interest in the physical computer and telephone machinery, the hardware. In this film the representation is mostly an accurate representation of the technology available in 1995, although the teenagers have the fastest and best equipment available at the time, indicating the desirability of hardware as a commodity.

The film also looks at the material route of data movement. The camera often follows phone lines into modems, showing the “street” along which the data travels. There is also often a shot of the yellow disc, housing the valuable Garbage file, again playing off the contrast between data and materiality.

The computers used by the hackers are represented as extensions of their identity as hackers. The film seems to conceptualise technology as female even sexually desirable. This can be seen from the scene in which the boys examine Kate’s laptop. The boys are looking at the laptop initially unaware that Kate is in the same room, physically involved with her boyfriend. Cereal Killer exclaims that he would like the laptop to have his children, and as they become aware of Kate, now naked to the waist, they comment that her “wetware” matches her hardware. This sexual desire of the computer is very specifically gendered, and Kate is not given a means to express her desire, as technology is gendered as female. This represents a cyborg coupling



analogous to sex, that excludes women. By extension, computer technology and cyberspace is seen as a male domain.

The computers are customised to represent their owners and users. They have animated desktops<sup>3</sup> proclaiming their users' names, and a logo representing their online identities. To prepare for his dual with Kate, Dade further customises his laptop's appearance by spray painting it in an army camouflage pattern, indicating the how the computer is an extension of his body, which has to be clothed for combat. The computer's presence in the film is further emphasised by the inclusion of loud keyboard noises.

The most obvious misrepresentation of technology is in the way the film represents user-interface. The film makes use of an exaggerated form of graphical user interface they have created. This makes the film visually more understandable and exciting but is misrepresentative of the technology available at the time and used by hackers. Hackers almost exclusively used command line interface. This is a kind of interface that is almost only text and the user interacts only through cryptic abbreviated text commands, understandable only to members of the group. Understandably screen shots of these text commands would not prove very exciting. For this reason the interface used is of a Windows 3.1 style with, for example, downloads<sup>4</sup> represented by pictures of floppy disks filling.

The misrepresentation is at its worst when users go online. The screen is filled by visual images of a cloud of swirling mathematical equations and fractals. This psuedo reference to mathematics is completely meaningless, and merely meant to impress the viewer of the film. When the internal file structure of a computer or network is represented, it echoes the architectural structure of city buildings. Files structures become translucent three-dimensional towers with file names glowing like window lights on skyscrapers.

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<sup>3</sup> A desktop is the background and icons the computer user uses to navigate his/her computer. It is usually not animated.

<sup>4</sup> A download is when a file is saved from another computer.



This representation is particularly clear near the end of the film when Belford and his assistant are under attack by the hackers. They are sitting in a console like a cockpit and Belford is wearing a hi-tech headset, despite the fact that none of the programs use voice. They are in front of a large screen, several metres high and wide. To create a more exciting and absorbing atmosphere, the film has imported some aspects from VR technology, making it seem like the hackers are battling inside a virtual world. The VR-like equipment worn by Dade in this scene reinforces this. This is clearly not a realistic representation of computer software. As most computer users will know, a file structure is not represented by computer software as a three dimensional “city” but as a list of names followed by file extensions and numbers representing their respective sizes.

Curiously, the viruses the hackers deploy are realistic, even if their graphical representation is not. The cookie monster virus and the wabbit virus are legendary hacker viruses, and they behave in the way described by the film. The film did consult hackers during production and this leads to the strange combination of accurate portrayals of some elements of hacker culture with a completely inaccurate representation of cyberspace.

Fundamentally the film seems to be interested in appealing to a young image-conscious audience. By representing hacker culture, even if inaccurately, the film draws attention to computer subcultures. Although they are still positioned at the margin by being depicted as a subculture, they are actually drawn further into the mainstream by depicting hacker subculture as popular ‘youth culture’. Computers are made to seem more popular than they perhaps are. This effect is further achieved by accompanying the computer use with very popular music, futuristic clothes and a good-looking cast.

The film does change the way in which computers are seen. The film moves them further into mainstream culture by making them ‘cool’ accessories of ‘youth culture’. The film does represent online identity through the use of hacker handles and the logos on the computer screens, but does not engage with the complexity of these representations or the way in which they interact with and potentially challenge offline constructions of identity.



The film represents cyberspace as ‘less embodied’ than offline life, by reducing images of the city to line structures. The film does not critically engage with the conflict between embodied reality and disembodied data, implied by this representation. Instead the urban metaphor of cyberspace, like the VR manipulation of cyberspace, is meant to make computer software and online life more accessible, and minimise the conflicts implied in for example Johnny Mnemonic.

### **You’ve Got Mail**

This film has already been discussed in Chapter 2, in terms of email. The film has a very traditional plot and despite its title again does not seem to be primarily interested in engaging with the construction of online identity or the representation of cyberspace. Like Hackers and Johnny Mnemonic, it uses the city metaphor, but for different purposes. The analysis of this film will show how this film draws the computer and the Internet into the private domestic spaces of the home, and that these private spaces are contrasted with business and commercial spaces. The film seems to suggest that separate power structures operate in the private spaces of the home and the Internet.

The plot of the film is mainly about the love story between Kathleen Kelly and Joe Fox. Joe Fox is the third generation of the Fox family, who own Fox Books. They have a ruthless attitude to business and are self-proclaimed conservatives. They are about to open a new Fox Books Superstore in New York’s west side, a liberal area.

Kathleen Kelly owns the children’s bookshop, “The Shop Around the Corner”. Fox Books is to open its new store just around the corner from her and will eventually cause her shop to close down.

Kathleen has just turned 30 and entered an AOL “over thirty” chat-room. She meets NY152 and they start corresponding through email and occasionally chat through AOL’s Instant Messenger. They both use AOL as their ISP and when they connect a recorded voice informs them “You’ve Got Mail”, when there are items in their inbox.



The title draws attention to AOL software, and AOL commercial power, as well as email communication.

As the Fox Superstore gains more and more business, Kathleen's shop is in trouble. Kathleen appeals to her online friend, NY152, for help. He advises her to fight, explaining his belief that all is fair in business. When her attempt fails she asks to meet him in real life. When Joe realises that his correspondent is Kathleen Kelly, he decides not to tell her that he is her email friend. Instead he keeps her company while she waits for her correspondent to appear.

After her bookshop closes, Kathleen keeps writing to NY152. Joe starts to visit Kathleen at home, despite their initial lack of regard for each other. Eventually Joe sets up a new offline meeting and tells Kathleen about his NY152 identity. She starts to write children's books and the film has a happy ending.

One of the main themes of the film seems to be big business. The Fox family frequently express their belief in cut-throat techniques and completely separate their business ethics from their private ethics and lives. They are politically conservative, are very wealthy and powerful. Although apparently merely a love-story this film seems to contain many political elements.

As the computer industry grows and gains many more consumers and income, the political and commercial dimensions become increasingly complex. As the Internet grows, it too becomes an increasingly political space.

This film foregrounds AOL, by using it as the only ISP. AOL is unusual in that it does not only connect the user to the Internet by providing a dial-up number; it also creates a whole small "internet" within its home page. This means that users can stay within the AOL site and look-up many topics by AOL's keyword system, without venturing out into the Internet. The content of the AOL site is carefully monitored and processed, and is for this reason not as democratic as the Internet where anything can be posted.



AOL is criticised for its closed mini-Internet and now that it merged with Netscape and Time Warner, many are nervous that they will have a monopoly on media and high-speed cable connections to the Internet. This ironically parallels Fox Books power in the film, but the film seems unaware of the commercial and political power of AOL.

The computers and their software are once again only tools for the film to pursue its love-story plot. Like Hackers, the film's title suggests an interest in technology, which is not followed through as the technology serves as props for more traditional narratives. You've Got Mail, also shows a lack of critical awareness of the technology it uses. This is evident in the way the users never struggle to get connected; they dial-up and immediately arrive in their mail-folder. The modem noises are loud and become symbolic for connecting to each other, not the Internet.

The lack of interest in the email medium is reinforced by the fact that there are never emails from other people in the inbox shown on camera. Email is further personalised by the use of voice. As Shopgirl reads an email from NY152, it starts in her voice reading aloud and quickly changes into his voice. This intimately connects the email with the character Joe Fox, and makes the nick, NY152, hollow and irrelevant, and an unimportant extension of Joe's identity. The reverse occurs when he reads her email. As discussed in the email section, this undermines the potential for conflict between different online and offline identities. The use of voice embodies the email, and gives it the presence and characteristics of offline voice communication.

The style of the emails has more in common with letter style than email. There are no emoticons or abbreviations, perhaps commonly found in emails of chat room users. This could be intentional, so that a parallel can be drawn between the correspondence between Joe Fox's father and Kathleen's mother, which took place through offline "snail-mail".

The fact that the two characters are in the same part of Manhattan also indicates the film's primary interest in a traditional love story. People all over the world use many chat-rooms. This yet again undermines the characteristics of online relationships, to serve the purpose of the "real world" romance.



Despite the film's reluctance to engage with the ways in which email and chatting is different from letters, it does include the idea of the importance of net-privacy. Shopgirl and NY152 agree not to disclose or discuss any personal information through their emails or chats. As any user's identity is usually unverifiable it is necessary for members in chat-rooms to be cautious about revealing too much offline information. The security aspect is not, however, mentioned in connection to their choice to avoid personal details.

The film also mixes the medium of the instant messenger and email. This is combined with the characters reading out loud. When Kathleen writes email to Joe he comes online and the email flows into their conversation. This glosses past several technical and software steps. The film takes these short cuts to dramatise the communication between the characters. It wants the conversation between the embodied identities of Kathleen and Joe to take priority. Another way the film demonstrates this is when it shows the clips of the scenes described in the email. An example of this would be when Joe speaks about finding one's identity when ordering Starbucks coffee. As Kathleen reads this email, it switches to voice-over by Joe, and a scene of a queue at Starbucks is seen. Once again the mode of text representation is judged inadequate and the film uses visual representations instead.

The film focuses on the private lives of its characters, and it takes the viewer into their homes, their private spaces. This is one of the devices the film uses to acquaint the viewer with the characters, but also makes one aware that the film sees computers as a private domestic tool. All the emails and conversations are written in the homes of the characters, despite the fact that they have computers at work. They use desktop computers at work but laptops at home. Laptops are not limited to the desktop and can be used in other locations. This allows the characters to write email from their beds. This links their communications to the most private space of the home and to their personal, not corporate, identities.

While they are both living with partners, they have to wait until they have their partners leave the home before they go online. By making this a covert activity they also assign going online to a more private space. The contents of the emails are not



factual and do not tell stories as they have decided not to share personal details. The consequence is that the emails take the form of the characters thoughts and associations. Kathleen tells Joe about the butterfly she saw on the subway and he tells her about the truck that pumps flour underground and leaves a cloud. These thoughts are free-floating and are not commented on by the other. They do not form a narrative and are even more private than the stories one tells one's friends on a day-to-day basis. This is perhaps not a realistic representation of the contents of email, which is often used to communicate narratives and factual information.

The opening title scene introduces the home as location of the private. As the AOL icon is clicked, on a computer desktop, a black and white line drawing animation comes forward on a new window, and reveals an overhead shot of a line drawing of the city. Already the city is reduced to a two dimensional representation which has less substance and is less 'embodied'. As the 'camera' zooms in, it becomes clear, because of the distinctive skyline, that the city is New York. As it gets closer to the city it becomes an oblique colour representation, made of simple geometric shapes without detail.

An arrow appears, and a user clicks on the city. This zooms in and more detail becomes visible, and eventually it is focussing on a city street. An area of the screen is selected and changes from animation to film, signifying the movement out of 'cyberspace' to the 'real'. It is Kathleen Kelly's house and she comes out of the front door. This animated introduction places emphasis both on New York City and the home as the location of the computer user. It also reinforces the façade of being a modern technological love story.

New York seems to take on a more important role as the mediator of this love story than the computer. It is the central part of the city that they describe to each other, and these descriptions form the basis of their relationship. The homogeneity of the film is part of its conservatism. The computer can assist people in allowing their communications to travel global distances but this film is only interested in travelling in Manhattan. The film ignores the social and cultural diversity of New York and the Internet. Both the characters are white and live in luxurious apartments in the same



area. These domestic spaces are where a lot of the film is shot and the interior shots are an important part of the attractive cinematography.

Kathleen has the New York skyline as her background on her computer, again linking the city to the computer and perhaps mimicking the opening scene. Joe's nick is NY152, where NY is clearly representative of New York.

In Hackers and Johnny Mnemonic the city represents the speed and flow of information. It is a shell for data that can be moved and manipulated. In You've Got Mail, this city is particular and familiar. It serves as a home, a private space. It serves to limit the frightening qualities of computers, described by the film as "the end of Western Civilisation". Instead it is used to represent the homogenous and the familiar. This conservative approach is ironically undermined by the way big business is represented as changing this space.

Kathleen's journalist boyfriend, Frank, voices the film's suspicion of technology most vocally. He staunchly believes that text should only be created on typewriters and collects them. The creation of text seems to be discussed quite frequently. It does not seem to be a sub-theme, but there is some sort of awareness of the different ways in which text is created. As a journalist, Frank is constantly involved in the production of text for his articles. He writes pseudo-intellectual critiques of modern society and seems to feel that the text computers produce is too ephemeral in comparison to typewriter text.

Kathleen's business is children's books and she also speaks of her love of Jane Austin's Pride and Prejudice, a text she keeps re-reading to enjoy the language. Books in this film are merchandise to be sold like any other consumable. The commercial and personal value of text are played off against each other in this film, but a comparison with computer text is not really made.

Kathleen describes the space her emails go as "the void", indicating that to some extent she also feels that the destination and life of the text she writes through her computer is unsure. She describes email as a type of communication "where you are more likely to talk about nothing than something." This again refers to their policy not



to reveal personal details and the type of non-narrative that is written as a consequence of this decision.

This film is mainly interesting because of the way it shows how email and chatting are now mainstream activities. The film is not interested in the potential effects of this technology on offline life, and this can be seen by the way it uses this technology as a prop instead of engaging with it. Yet, despite this lack of criticism or awareness, it does show the way in which the computer has become a domestic tool. Despite its inaccuracies the film's representations of email and cyberspace do also inform the way online identity and Internet representation are conceptualised.

The film is placed in a wealthy area of a first world country and this should be taken into consideration. Users in other areas may not have as stable an Internet connection and may not be able to own a new laptop computer, which is an expensive item. The way in which this film takes this wealth, technology and connectivity for granted is part of the way in which it depicts the technology as 'normal'.

The way in which the film uses some metaphors like the city shows how the film medium is developing a set of typical representations, codes and maybe even narrative structures, to represent the Internet. This also shows the way computer technology is increasingly becoming part of the centre. It is slowly getting a metaphoric language, but this film still imposes offline narratives on computer use.

### **The Matrix**

Of all the films analysed the Matrix engages most critically with the way technology is changing the understanding of identity, the body and representation. This film both shows the way technology influences the construction of these concepts and attempts to construct and critique a current understanding of concepts discussed in Chapter 1.

Many explanations are offered to the central question: "What is the Matrix?" and a simple explanation is that it is a computer program run by artificial intelligence (AI), which simulates life in 1999. The bodies of the human beings on earth in 2199 are



plugged into machines in which they generate electricity. Their minds are in a simulated reality, the Matrix. Most of them believe this reality to be all there is, but a few question this online world and try to discover the material world in which their bodies are anchored.

The film depicts this online reality as a computer simulation created by the AI to occupy the human mind. A prominent focus of the film is technology and how it is represented. Both within and outside the Matrix there is a focus on technology and how it is used to mediate reality. I will look at the opening scene, and two subsequent scenes, and delve more deeply into the interaction between technology and identity that takes place. I am interested in the many different narratives of mythology, religion, drug culture, and literature (and reality), employed in this film to represent technology and reality. I also want to look at the way the boundaries of the body are shifted throughout the film.

As in Johnny Mnemonic, the opening scene flows directly from the title and introduces the representation of 'cyberspace' in this film. The film opens with a black screen with vertical lines of falling green symbols. As the viewer will soon notice, this is representative of a computer screen. The falling symbols do not seem to be alphabetic but nonetheless the vertical lines fade out as in each column a letter from the title remains. Eventually only the words, "THE MATRIX", are visible in white letters on a black screen. These letters surge forward to the viewer and then fade out of sight. The blank screen is replaced by a small, flickering, green block in the upper left corner, functioning as a prompt. The sound, significantly, changes from the surging opening music to the sounds of a modem. The prompt flickers like a cursor and as we hear Trinity speak, UNIX<sup>5</sup>-like command lines scroll across the screen. While Trinity and possibly Apoc speak, we see the text "trace program running" scroll along the top of the screen. This introduces the idea that telecommunications technology is not secure or private. The screen changes into columns of numbers as the trace program attempts to locate the number from which the conversation was initiated. Morpheus's name is dropped and the idea that "Neo is the One" is introduced. Suspense is created as the number is increasingly deciphered and Trinity

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<sup>5</sup> UNIX is an early operating system with a text only interface. The user manipulates his environment by typing command lines. It has a difficult interface and is frequently used by programmers.



breaks the connection just in time. The sequence of numbers comes towards the screen and changes into three-dimensional objects made up of pixels of light. The camera travels through a zero that has become a tunnel into the computer screen. The screen then blacks out and the film starts with a blank screen in which, in the centre, a flashlight shines.

A prominent characteristic of this sequence is the constant motion of the viewer's perspective. The two dimensional sequence of the symbols dissolves into the one line of text and then the viewer moves with the camera through the computer screen into the film. In this way the film moves from the representation of a computer interface to a film representation. The title shot is a conventional one, but then the viewer moves through this shot to another representation of online activity. This time, however, the computer activity is already part of the action of the film. As one views the screen it becomes clear that you are viewing someone or something else viewing and listening to the voices. These multiple perspectives layered over each other are analogous to the online experience where the users exist both online and offline and are viewed by others who also exist in both these places. The medium of film creates yet another layer of presence, observation, and representation. The camera is a viewer and brings us in as spectators, but the medium of film also alters the observation possible. The medium and the narrative of film necessarily alter the representation of technology, as is the case in this scene.

In The Matrix three versions of technology are represented. The first is the technology as created and used by the AI, and this of course includes the Matrix itself, and the machines they use to observe and control the humans in the 'real' world. Secondly, there is the technology used by the 'free humans', which is also futuristic but different from the technology used by the AI. Then finally there is the twentieth century technology represented inside the Matrix. This is in some ways most interesting because it is a representation of the technology used by the viewers of the film. Yet because of the plot, all three representations of technology intersect at many points in the film, and to some extent represent the many facets of current technology and how it is perceived.



This stylised opening was already used in many of the trailers and has become a representation of the film. A very popular screen saver depicting the falling green symbols was widely downloaded as many computer users imagined themselves watching the matrix. This type of crossover from film to computer is common and particularly effective if the film already deals with technology. Many of the films discussed released websites as a kind of cyber-trailer. The Matrix's website at [www.whatisthematrix.com](http://www.whatisthematrix.com) is an excellent example of this. The site is very dynamic as it plays music from the film and is animated. The site depicts several computer terminals, as seen inside the Nebuchadnezzar. Each screen is a link and as the mouse scrolls over a screen the contents of that link is displayed on the centre screen, which is larger than the rest. As the text of the link is displayed, modem-like noises are heard, giving the impression of dialling-up to the link. This re-affirms the prominent role the telephone plays in the film, and re-emphasises the power of the Internet connection, which ironically the web-site viewer is using.

The main section of the film I have chosen for analysis starts when Neo has been taken to the abandoned hotel by Trinity to meet Morpheus for the first time. The scene starts with Neo entering room 1313 and sitting down with Morpheus in a pair of cracked armchairs. The section ends with Neo and Morpheus again seated in these cracked armchairs, this time however, located in the construct, a program run by Morpheus.

This section contains many of the interesting elements of the film. The prominent themes of reality, sleep and dream and the several different narratives are evident in this section. The representation of Neo's body and the different representations of the Matrix are also of interest.

This section chosen for analysis is about 25 minutes long and starts when Neo enters the abandoned hotel with Trinity, to meet Morpheus for the first time. As Neo enters the room Morpheus turns around. He has a powerful presence, and like the other members of his group, is dressed all in black with black mirror shade sunglasses. He invites Neo to sit down on a pair of broken red leather armchairs that fit in with the dilapidated and sparse old-fashioned furnishings.



Morpheus explains that no one can tell Neo what the Matrix is and that the only way to understand the truth is to see it for himself. He offers Neo a choice between a red pill and a blue pill. He tells him that if he takes the red pill there will be no going back. He can "...stay in wonderland and see exactly how deep the rabbit hole goes."

If he takes the blue pill he will wake up in his bed and can believe that the meeting was a dream.

Neo takes the red pill that contains a trace program allowing Trinity and Apoc to locate his real body in the electricity-generating human storage fields. Morpheus takes Neo into the next room that is filled with electronic equipment. Neo sits in a chair looking at a mirror while Trinity monitors his vital signs and the rest try to locate his body outside the Matrix. Neo sees the mirror surface turn liquid and touches it. The mirror is somehow fluid and starts to cover his body. He starts to go into cardiac arrest just as they locate his body and dial the Nebuchadnezzar to exit the Matrix, taking Neo with them.

In the next scene Neo 'awakens' in a sack of red jelly like amniotic fluid, without body hair and naked. He fights his way through the sack and vomits. He sees that he is attached to the sack by thousands of cables connected to metal plugs all over his body. Surrounding him, for as far as the eye can see, are pods containing human bodies, attached to plant-like structures kilometres high. An insect-like robot approaches and disconnects Neo from the cables and he is expelled down the waste tube into the water below. Disorientated and covered in jelly he is picked up by the Nebuchadnezzar.

The next section of the sequence is Neo's recovery. Tank and Dozer stimulate Neo's atrophied muscles through acupuncture and operate on him to remove the metal plugs embedded in his arms, legs and back. Slowly Neo's body heals and develops. He is then ready to be plugged into the construct, a training virtual reality program, and to be shown what the Matrix is.

This takes us to the final scenes of this sequence when Neo is plugged into the construct through the final remaining jack in the back of his head. The construct is a completely white space in which Neo and Morpheus stand. They are both clothed and



Neo's hair is once again long. This section is particularly interesting as Morpheus explains "cyberspace" to Neo. They are once again seated on the 'same' armchairs as in the first scene, this time in front of a large television. Through the medium of the television Morpheus shows Neo the world in 1999. He then points the remote control and their surroundings change into a grey wasteland. This, he explains is the present state of the earth. He tells Neo the history of the invention of the AI, the consequent battle and then shows him the way in which the AI currently control the humans.

He is shown the fields in which humans are grown, harvested and used to produce power for the AI. The horrifying efficiency of the system is explained as they see a baby being fed the liquefied remains of the dead.

The camera zooms out and the image of the fields of pods becomes the image displayed on the television, in front of Neo and Morpheus's armchairs. Morpheus explains that the whole reason for the Matrix is to reduce human bodies to batteries. Neo cannot accept what Morpheus has shown him and screams to be let out. As he becomes more and more upset the scene ends and Morpheus and Neo are unplugged from the construct and return to the ship.

A prominent feature of this section is the use of various types of technology. The film exposes the viewer to technology used by different groups in various time periods. This creates a depiction of current technology, futuristic technology and the imagined technology created by AI. This allows the film to play with all sorts of users' interfaces and lets technology be depicted as both familiar and alien. Preceding this section the viewer has been exposed to the technology inside the Matrix, as experienced by Neo. The machines are unremarkable. They are square, functional and grey. The telephones are large, old and black. When Neo is arrested and interrogated by the agents, we are exposed to the AI's advanced technology. First they make his mouth grow shut, an apparently impossible manipulation of Neo's body, they then implant a bug in him.

This is the first real introduction to the AI technology. The agent places a small probe-like oblong metal object over Neo's navel. This bug initially looks like the kind of equipment that might well exist in the late twentieth century. It then seems to come to



life. It extends and wriggles until it looks like a fluid robotic squid. It is animated and squirms, and burrows into Neo's navel. This alien technology is frightening because it invades Neo's body. He is also drugged or altered so that he doesn't remember this implant and carries the bug unawares.

The rest of the AI technology is very similar in style. When Morpheus explains to Neo how the AI use human bodies creating energy, he shows him the fields of plant-like structures housing the human bodies. They strongly resemble fields of organic plants, for example tomato plants, although they are an unnatural black colour and are made of artificial substances like metal. Like the bugs, they are all the more disconcerting because they mimic nature in a macabre way. Somehow the more organic shape and structure of this technology does seem to be more advanced, making the square consoles in the matrix look mechanical and primitive.

This is perhaps the film's attempt to negotiate boundaries between the organic and technological. The AI technology that mimics nature is sinister because it seems natural but is anything but. It is the appearance and faking of the familiar that is threatening. To fake nature seems more diabolical than to construct a completely new and alternative technology. Twentieth century technology is relatively inert and geometrical. The organic shapes of the AI technology form a strong contrast to this and appear more complex.

The robot that picks Neo up as he emerges from the pod, in which his body has been kept, resembles a spider or some kind of crustacean. Although this machine frees Neo it is still an intimidating version of AI technology. When this robot frees Neo, he is flushed down the waste chute and picked up by the Nebuchadnezzar.

The mechanical arm that pulls him into the hovercraft is cruder in design. It does not look as fluid or organic. This is true of most of the resistance movement's technology. It is more sophisticated than the technology inside the Matrix, since it was created over a hundred years in the future; but it retains a more mechanical, solid feel than the AI technology. It always seems to be an extension of twentieth century technology. The equipment used to monitor Neo's vital signs, and the acupuncture needles used to stimulate his muscle development are good examples of this. This representation of



technology is effective because it makes Morpheus's group's technology seems familiar and reassuring, in comparison to the sinister, almost intelligent, technology used by the AI, who are, ironically also part of their technology.

As discussed earlier, the Matrix itself is represented in multiple ways. The main advertising campaign for this film was the question "What is the Matrix?" and as suggested in the introduction, the film offers multiple answers. The question is posed by Trinity and Morpheus and asked by Neo. Some of the explanations are a very telling reflection of the main themes of the film. In Neo's first conversation with Morpheus, Morpheus says: "The Matrix is everywhere, all around. You can feel it.... It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." He later adds that the Matrix is "a prison for your mind." At the very end of the section chosen for analysis, Morpheus says that the Matrix is control. It is a "computer generated dream world" that changes the human body into a battery.

These explanations and comments show the philosophical and psychological control that the AI exercise over the humans. The matrix is a false reality used to drug and subdue human minds so that the bodies can be used to generate power. The Matrix fakes human reality in a way that is almost undetectable. Yet Neo and a few others are able to sense the limits of this simulated reality, even if they cannot offer an explanation.

When Neo comes aboard the Nebuchadnezzar he sees another element of the Matrix. He is shown the computer code that induces the Matrix reality. This takes the form of the green symbols running down the monitors, as described earlier. There are several such consoles inside the hovercraft and Morpheus's team has learnt to 'read' these screens and visualise the data in terms of people and events inside the Matrix.

When Neo is introduced into the construct he becomes aware of the artificiality of a computer simulation and is shown that all virtual environments can be controlled, consciously and unconsciously. A good example of this is that his appearance inside the construct is a consequence of his body image.



The multiple visual representations of the Matrix are constantly present in the film and one of the main tasks of the film seems to be to decipher the nature and reality of the Matrix, and what this reflects about representation of technology and relationships between humans and machines.

The obvious next question for the viewer is: what does the Matrix represent? There seem to be multiple and varied interpretations of this film, ranging from social commentary about drugs and violence in contemporary culture, to a critique of late capitalism. The most concrete explanation seems to lie in the all-controlling nature of the Matrix. Perhaps one of the main themes can be summarised as the individual attempting to create his/her identity outside the all-creating, all-controlling Matrix. I believe the Matrix partially represents the fear of becoming an involuntary component of a machine or artificial intelligence, a theme of many cyberpunk and science fiction films. It represents an attempt by individuals to take charge of their identities and construct themselves through their actions.

A very significant part of the experience and representation of identity happens through the body. The most powerful example has been mentioned earlier. When Neo enters the construct for the first time Morpheus explains to him that he is in a virtual reality. To prove this point he asks Neo to look at himself. Offline he has a shaven head and plugs on the back of his head, but online he has longer hair, is clothed differently and has no plugs. He appears very similar to how he looked inside the Matrix. Morpheus explains to him that his physical manifestation is a product of his “residual self-image ... the mental projection of [his] digital self”.

This is a very interesting explanation of virtual embodiment. It implies that despite the fact that the physical body remains rooted offline, in this case plugged into a machine in the hovercraft, the body remains a vital part of identity. The physical self is an integral part of the self-concept and is for this reason projected into online transactions. The film seems to suggest that there is no way to ‘lose’ the body when going online, or in this case plugging into the construct. The body is much more than the housing of essential information that makes up the self. It is part of this essential part of this self. This is in contrast to Hayles’ fear that it is being reduced to data.



So, the self includes embodiment and this is manifested in a virtual body, in the construct, in this film; but analogously could apply to descriptions of the body in chat rooms, in email, and on the Internet. Virtual and offline bodies are hence subject to the individual's identity, of which the body is a vital part. The fact that Neo and the others can die in the Matrix is another development of the same idea. If the mind believes the cyber-body dies then this manifests itself in the offline body, because the mind and body are believed to be inextricably connected. This strongly argues against any dualist explanations for online experiences.

Neo is able to augment his online appearance and abilities through the use of software. This makes his virtual body truly a cyborg virtual body. It is not just a representation or reflection of his identity and offline body, it is actively altered and augmented through the use of technology, in this case software. Intriguingly, Neo's offline body is restored to be as close to "natural" as possible.<sup>6</sup> The film constructs the natural state as that free of technological augmentation. To be natural is the opposite of being a cyborg. When Neo's real body is found in the pink sac, it is evident that he already is a cyborg. The boundaries of his body are unclear as the tubes and jack intrude into him and his bodily fluids flow outside him in the tubes. The boundaries of what is inside and what is outside of the body are shifted. Even when he is unplugged and removed from that environment he still has the jacks and metal bolts on and in his body. It is interesting that Tank and Dozer are the ones who operate on him and remove the metal elements from his body, as they are the only two characters who were naturally born and are untainted by the effects of the AI and the Matrix. For this reason they are the appropriate characters to restore Neo's body to its natural form. Yet, ironically this natural form cannot be used in the struggle against the Matrix and the AI and Neo has to become a software cyborg.

The origin of the human body is an important secondary theme. As mentioned in the paragraph above, the origin of Tank and Dozer's bodies is mentioned and contrasted with Neo's journey from the growing fields to the hovercraft. The metaphor of birth is visually very prominent in this section. Neo struggles through the 'amniotic fluid' inside the womb-like sac and tried to free himself to gain autonomy. He is expelled

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<sup>6</sup> This links closely to Johnny Mnemonic's themes of restoration to the natural and biological.



through the waste canal, the final stage of the birth. Nude and covered with jelly he is carefully lifted into the hovercraft. Although born helpless he is not a baby and this unnatural state is further emphasised by the plugs in his body. It is also contrasted with the earlier shot of the baby in the sac being fed the dark sinister fluid of the liquefied dead. The theme of birth is also explicitly mentioned in the dialogue when Morpheus tells Neo that the twentieth century gave birth to AI and spawned a race of beings dependant on machines to survive.

The theme of birth might also represent the coming about of a type of embodiment. When Neo is 'born' from the sac his state of embodiment changes from cyborg to 'natural' body. When he is plugged into the construct he again changes his form of embodiment, and like a baby has to learn all his skills from scratch.

The film also pays close attention to the physiological nature of the human body. This is evident in the many times the inside of the body is shown. By showing representations of the internal parts of the human bodies the film draws attention to their vulnerability and the main way in which they are different from the agents who are only representations of humans, without insides. This emphasises the undeniably biological form of the human body, in contrast to the AI, who only exist as software, but also shows the technological intrusion into zones that were previously taboo and impenetrable. This voyeurism is multi-faceted. It is shown that it is necessary to monitor the well being of the person but is also used to intrude into the human body to gain information.

What is even more interesting is that most of the observation of Neo's body occurs inside the Matrix when Neo's real body is still in the sac in the growing fields. This means that the body whose insides we are seeing does not really exist. It is a virtual body created by the AI as part of the Matrix. The first example of this occurs when Trinity and Switch try to remove the bug in Neo before bringing him to Morpheus. They place a device over his abdomen to locate the bug and his internal organs become visible in a similar way to an ultra-sound scan. Later, when Neo's real body is being located, Trinity monitors his vital signs, fearing that he will go into cardiac arrest. The machinery around Trinity allows several different audio-visual views of Neo's body. At this point in the film the viewer is not aware that these images are of



Neo's cyber-body and this makes the virtual body seem even more powerful and convincing later. It again emphasises the point that a virtual body is vulnerable and mortal; and a vital element of identity.

A primary theme of the "Matrix" is reality and simulation, and to a lesser extent, sleep and dream, which are also alternative ways experiencing realities. Sleep and dream have also been used in other older narratives to signify that reality is merely what you perceive at the time, and to question the nature of reality. Near the beginning of the film the camera zooms in on Baudrillard's "The Precession of the Simulacra", indicating a theoretical focus that continues to question the nature of reality. This article discusses the nature of reality and simulation. By including this reference to this text, the creators of the film seem to want to create a philosophical and critical focus for the film. The fact that this is subtly indicated shows that it is only aimed at viewers who are already familiar with this text. Instead of attempting to talk the ordinary viewer through the more abstract theory, as is often the case in popular films, this film clearly intentionally operates at multiple levels.

These levels intersect most clearly in the discussion of reality and simulation. This is clearest when one reads the script of the Matrix, available on the Internet. This script is not identical to the dialogue of the film, and this shows that some more detailed and explicit references to Baudrillard have been omitted. The strongest example of this is when Morpheus explains to Neo "You have been living inside Baudrillard's vision, inside the map, not the territory."

The references to simulations are evident in the multiple references to the "real". The analogy of sleep and dream are used to compare the simulation to the reality. As discussed above, when the dream becomes indistinguishable from reality it has a lot in common with Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra. By letting Neo feel like he is experiencing the real at many points in the film, the notion of reality is to some extent also undermined. The film on one level suggests that the "real" world exists only offline and can only be experienced through unaugmented bodies. But by ending the film in the Matrix, the film seems to also suggest that the space of the real is the space in which you can act.



Many examples of this can be found in the section of the film discussed earlier. Just shortly after Neo enters room 1313 Morpheus says to him: “I can see it in your eyes. You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he is expecting to wake up. Ironically this not far from the truth.” This is one of the many examples when an analogy is drawn between sleep (and dreaming) and waking; and simulation and reality. The analogy is interesting because it implies that the dreamer is not aware that he is dreaming, and is always unsure whether he is awake, but unable to verify this as he can only ever occupy one of the two states. But at the same time it also implies that the dreamer has less at stake and is for this reason more accepting and less anxious. This is paradoxical as it implies an awareness of the state of sleep or wakefulness that is unverifiable. This paradox stretches to Neo’s, and by extension ‘every man’ in the Matrix’s, awareness of his reality.

The link between reality and simulation and sleep and dream is not only manipulated by the agents but also by Morpheus and his people. When Trinity first contacts Neo he is not sure what happened and wonders if he dreamed the incident. Later, in room 1313 Neo is given the following choice by Morpheus: “You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe.” As discussed earlier: the blue pill and red pill are software programs inserted into Neo’s body. The blue pill resets the Matrix and places Neo back at home. The agents used a similar program after they place the bug in Neo. The control lies in the hands of the programmers and the means do not seem to have a moral dimension, merely the ends.

When Neo’s ‘real’ body arrives on the hovercraft he slowly gains consciousness and asks: “... am I dead?” This signals that not only are the lines between sleep and waking blurred by the experience in and outside the Matrix, but even existence is questioned. Neo is now in a new body in a new reality and is hence starting a new life. His surroundings and experiences of himself are all unfamiliar, and so his old life has died.

The irony of these multiple modes of existence is exposed by Morpheus, who says: “Welcome to the real world, Neo,” as he arrives on board the *Nebuchadnezzar*. Although to Morpheus the life aboard the hovercraft is the most real ‘real life’, we soon find out that all the action actually takes place in “cyberspace”, either inside the



Matrix or in the construct. The 'meat' bodies are only useful when plugged into a terminal. This complicates the assumptions about reality even further, as it is usually the place in which you can act and perform your identity through your body.

Yet the vulnerability of these bodies becomes exposed when Cypher, now working for the agents, speaks to Trinity over the phone. They assume he will transfer them back to the hovercraft, but instead he is intent on killing their helpless off-line bodies. He caresses Trinity's face and body while speaking to her over the phone. This is the strongest example of separation of the on-line and offline body as Trinity, conscious in her cyber-body, is unable to feel this molestation. Cypher then unplugs Switch. By unplugging her he murders her and her body crumples in the Matrix, as she is unable to defend herself. Helpless, the rest wait to see who will die next. Hence it is illustrated that death can occur in isolation of the mind or the body. If you are killed inside the Matrix your body dies, as Morpheus explains to Neo: "The body cannot live without the mind." But if the body dies the mind is necessarily terminated.

When Neo and Morpheus sit in the construct on the armchairs, Morpheus turns the television on to show Neo the 'real' world in 2199. As the camera zooms in on the television image of a burnt wasteland that was formerly Chicago, Morpheus says to Neo: "The desert of the real." This is once again a direct reference to Baudrillard and is a quotation from his work Simulations<sup>7</sup>.

An interesting characteristic of this film is the rich use of intertextual references, a characteristic of postmodern texts. There are several conspicuous references to mythology and religion, through the use of the characters' names. Morpheus is a reference to the Greek god of sleep and dream. This is also the source of the name for the drug morphine. Trinity's name reminds one of the Holy Trinity and carries a Christian reference. As do the many references to Neo as the 'chosen one'<sup>8</sup>. Common religious and mythological narratives are woven through the plot, but no narrative is

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<sup>7</sup> This is from a section of Baudrillard's text which reads: "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it.... Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory - the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which, are no longer those of the Empire but our own. The desert of the real itself."

<sup>8</sup> The interpretation of the Matrix as a primarily Christian narrative has been surprisingly popular. Several Christian readings of the Matrix can be found on the Internet.



given the master voice. The themes of fate and destiny add another postmodern edge to the narrative, as they are strongly contrasted with individual choice. It is always unclear if events are happening because they have been predestined or because the protagonists have chosen their actions.

There are also blatant references to other narratives with similar themes. One of these is the Lewis Carroll story of Alice in Wonderland and its sequel Through the Looking Glass. The first reference is the white rabbit Trinity tells Neo to follow in the beginning of the film. Then in room 1313 Morpheus invites Neo to take the red pill and “stay in wonderland and see how deep the rabbit hole goes”. Next Neo touches the mirror, and like Alice, is able to transfer to another location through the looking glass. The effect of these references is the sense of confusion about reality and dream, and apparent logicity of another world or dimension, which are imported and emphasised. It also gives this fantasy cyberpunk story a twentieth century referent and makes it seem more credible. A similar effect is created by a brief reference to another popular twentieth century narrative, The Wizard of Oz. As Neo goes into cardiac arrest Ciphher says: “Buckle your seatbelt, Dorothy! Kansas is going bye bye.” Once again this narrative focuses on the nature of reality, and dream and sleep.

As mentioned above, there are also references to drugs and drug-taking in The Matrix. In an early scene, shortly after Trinity has made her first contact with Neo, he is asked by some acquaintances whether he has taken bad mescaline<sup>9</sup>. Later, when the mirror turns liquid, Neo asks whether the red pill contained mind-altering drugs. The references to the red pill and the blue pill have been interpreted as a social commentary on drug taking in the twentieth century. I think that this is an oversimplification. The purpose of including references to drugs seems to be to challenge assumptions about the nature of reality. These references seem to suggest that perception of reality plays an important part in determining what is real and what is not. A perceptive change, as can be induced by chemicals, can change the nature of perceived reality.

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<sup>9</sup> An hallucinogenic drug.



The notion that drugs can alter the perception of reality is in contrast to the idea that reality itself can be changed. Obviously Neo's perceptions of reality do change when he is confronted with a world outside the Matrix, but that is in reaction to his environment. As with Alice in Wonderland, and the religious and mythological references, this narrative adds yet another level of insecurity to Neo, and the viewer's, perspectives, as they are never sure whether the reality they experience exists or is a product of their perception.

The Matrix is perhaps the most interesting of the films to be discussed because it operates at so many levels. It was immensely popular and a sequel is eagerly awaited. The Internet is teeming with Matrix sites, and with sites with references to The Matrix. A brief examination of these sites shows that they originate from all sectors of the Internet community.

Slashdot ([www.slashdot.com](http://www.slashdot.com)), a very popular site for programmers and other computer "nerds"<sup>10</sup>, voted The Matrix the most successful hacker movie. This is a reference to yet another narrative embedded in the film – that of the computer hacker. The control and manipulation of computer programs by Trinity is evident when she first contacts Neo. Neo recognises Trinity's name as she has a legendary online reputation, although he assumes she is a man.

Later in the film, shortly before the agents implant the bug, Agent Smith tells Neo, and the viewer, "[Your] other life is lived in computers where you go by the hacker alias Neo, and are guilty of virtually every computer crime we have a law for...". This re-situates the film in a familiar environment. At this point in the film Neo is simply portrayed as a hacker. This is almost immediately complicated when Neo is not allowed to make his phone call and his mouth grows shut.

Neo is Thomas Anderson's nick or online name. It is significant that this is the name he keeps throughout the film and only his employer and Agent Smith address him as Thomas Anderson. This online identity is hence made to be more real and more significant, until it is his only identity. This is a form of rebellion towards the system

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<sup>10</sup> A direct quote from slashdot's home page.



the Matrix imposes and creates a world in which the identity is chosen and created by the user. Although, as previously mentioned this autonomy is conflict with the notion of fate and destiny.

The high degree of web-presence of The Matrix is symbolic of its interaction with the Internet. The themes of reality and its representations of technology obviously make it of interest to those who frequently use computers. This does not though explain the cult status the film seems to enjoy, or the strong disapproval it has met with.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Hackers it does not manipulate existing computer technology to gain popularity. By representing a futuristic narrative the film avoids the problems experienced by Hackers and You've Got Mail. It has taken many elements from the cyberpunk genre but has questioned many of the binary oppositions still underpinning cyberpunk.

One of the most interesting elements of the film is the way it links the body with presence. To be present, one needs in some extent to be embodied. The film negates any obvious dualism between mind and body. It is still, however, interested in the 'natural' form of the body in contrast to the cyborg, showing that these concepts remain to some extent in conflict. Beside its post-structuralist projects, the film engages intellectually and visually with many postmodernist ideas. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the reference to Baudrillard. But on a more abstract level the way in which the film weaves classical narratives through each other is extremely interesting and postmodern. It negates any one narrative as master narrative. All the narratives work to destabilise each other, every time adding another level of meaning and altering the original meaning of the narrative at the same time. This allows for a very complex representation of technology, identity and reality under the guise of an action movie.

## **Conclusion**

The main purpose of analysing these films is to question how a secondary media, film, interprets identity and representation on the Internet. It needs to be taken into account that film has conventions, focuses and preconceptions unique to its media.

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<sup>11</sup> It was discussed as a contributing factor to the Carolina school shooting in 2000. The scholars who shot the other students wore black trench coats and were set to mimic the scene where Neo and Trinity go and rescue Morpheus from the agents.



These films were all Hollywood 'blockbusters', giving them a certain style and limitations.

It has been suggested in this chapter that the film representations of computer-mediated communication challenge theoretical assumptions about the body, gender, identity, and representation. The films also show how changing perceptions of technology influence the way in which identity, gender and the body are represented. The integral role of the body in the understanding and representation of the body is explored in *Johnny Mnemonic* and *the Matrix*. The conflict and boundaries between the virtual body and the offline body are also frequently dramatised.

One of the most prominent tendencies of film representation seems to be to make Internet text visual, as can be seen from the various different dramatisation of cyberspace. As is suggested in the section on *You've Got Mail*, this could even be seen to be the start of a film narrative of the Internet. This narrative of the Internet makes non-embodied data to some extent embodied in a visual representation. This will influence the way data and virtual identities are understood.

The films analysed also show how computer-mediated communication has moved from being conceptualised as the Other, to being part of the domestic space and part of a homogenous representation of American culture. The films do not critically examine the potential contradictions and fragmentations caused by online identity and instead keep linking online identity to the offline body. This is particularly evident in *You've Got Mail*.

The interactions between the Internet and the offline world are represented through the use of AOL software, indicating the way offline business power shapes the Internet. It is also shown through the representation of the hacker and the virus as potentially dangerous and to be policed by governments. The most extreme representation of the interaction between the computer and the offline world is the idea of NAS, disease caused by the interaction with machines.

As can be seen from the analyses given above, the films are often critically unaware of the complexity of these interactions, and conceptualise them as dangerous. In all



the films analysed in this chapter, there remains a powerful preoccupation with the notions of the 'natural' and the 'real', even though they are rarely fully articulated.



## Conclusion

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The aim of this thesis has been to investigate the ways in which identity is established and represented on the Internet. Through detailed case studies of different Internet sites, I have examined the changing parameters of these concepts, and indeed of our concept of 'reality' itself. In so doing I have made use of postmodern understandings of identity and representation, but I have also pointed to ways in which such understandings need to be interrogated and expanded in the new contexts provided by the Internet.

The analysis of the Internet texts has shown that identity on the Internet is characterised by instability. Email nicks can misrepresent users and can be unverifiable. The email nicks and addresses are the only references to offline authors and can be faked, as discussed in detail in Chapter 2. The textual instability of email, lists, MUDs, and chats, further destabilises identities as their textual traces disappear so rapidly after they have been typed. This means that the performance of online identity through these media is fleeting and cannot be later used to compare with more recent performances of identity. The presence of online identities is also consequently fleeting and unstable.

The representation of the self on websites is more stable but still carries with it the problems of unverifiability and the possibility of faking. The analysis of the homepages shows the frequent references to offline identities, and it can be seen how these references substantiate the online identities. These homepages are examples of how some online identities are continuations and extensions of offline identities and this can be seen by the inclusion of personal photographs and frequent references to offline life. The analysis of these homepages suggests that many online representations of identity are more congruent with the user's offline identity. This may suggest that identity is not as fragmented as postmodern theory suggests. Although the Internet is a playground for identity games it seems that the basic representations of identity are often strongly linked to offline identities, and are not as multiple as critics like Turkle suggest. Identity performances seem to depend on



location and role inside that location. People perform different fragments of themselves as they play different roles both online and offline, and the important difference is that online identity is more open to faking than offline identity, and there are greater possibilities to create different roles and names online. An online identity which has nothing in common with the offline identity authoring it, does not seem to be as common as suggested by popular media.

Interestingly, the films, too, all seem to suggest drastically different online and offline identities, perhaps expressing the fear that online identities can be misrepresentations. Examples of this can be found in Hackers, where a ten year old is the powerful hacker “Zero Cool”, and in Matrix, where office drone Thomas Anderson, is also Neo. You’ve Got Mail underplays the potential chasm between online and offline identities, possibly in denial of the same fear of the instability of online identity.

It must also be noted that any online identity, not matter how closely related to the offline author, is necessarily different and separate because of the medium it inhabits. This has been discussed at some length in Chapter 2. It is this complex interaction of online and offline identity that is one of the most interesting dimensions that this study raises. It is a curious paradox. The online identity and virtual body are essentially to some degree anchored in the offline world, but are at the same time new entities. The online identity is not a mere reflection of the offline identity. The virtual body is not a mere representation of the material body.

The paradoxical way in which the Internet connects and refers to the offline world is most evident in the virtual body, which I have only been able to touch on in this thesis. The way in which the material body protrudes onto the Internet is surprising and revealing. The body appears on the Internet in a variety of forms, as emoticons, photographs, illustrations and descriptions. This indicates that identity seems to want to be embodied, and that having an embodied status increases presence. This is in strong contrast to the belief that the body is only relevant as a substrate for information.

The presence of the body on the Internet and the way this is inextricably bound up with identity seems to confirm Butler’s suggestion that the body is a constitutive



concept. This seems to challenge the postmodernist notion that all reality is facilitated through language. Butler does argue that the body is tightly connected with discourse and by extension representation, but this is in connection to the way sex is materialised by discourse. The Internet adds its own dimensions to the discourses that control and constrain the body. The Internet constantly refers to the body, indirectly through establishing online presence, and directly by creating a virtual body. The virtual body can take many different forms, but essentially they are flat and two dimensional with no interior and no organs. Many of the bodies to the homepages and on a lesser extent on web-rings, are references to real offline bodies through digital photographs. This creates a discourse of the body online. Butler's use of the concept of performativity has been very useful in showing how this functions.

The female gender of the representations in the web-pages also add a further dimension of embodiment to the representations of the virtual bodies. The gendered representations usually invoke images of offline bodies or descriptions of femaleness, but sometimes gender can be completely virtual, as in *Ananova*. Future studies should try to determine if male users represent their bodies and identities in similar ways.

The Internet texts do not discuss the interaction between the users and their machines overtly, but the design and structure of the web-pages signals a strong awareness of the conventions, and limitations of the web-design. The online identities do not describe themselves as cyborgs or seem to speak of the computers as extensions of their bodies. Yet, the idea of the cyborg has been extensively theorised. All the films, except *You've Got Mail*, construct and manipulate the interaction between man and machine and most of them overtly tackle the concept of the cyborg and the impact this has on the "natural" body. From this it can perhaps be concluded that the films are dramatising the fear of losing the "natural" body, but that online users do not share that fear as they do not seem to be critical or aware of themselves as cyborgs.

The computer users in Chapter 2 do seem to see the Internet as a type of alternative reality. This is evident in the way presence reflects a sense of "being there" and the need to establish online "homes" to reflect online identity. Turkle reports computer users describing the online life as comparable with offline life, the one not more real than the other. This has not entirely been reflected in this study, as there is often a



tight interaction with offline life in the representation of online identity. Yet, the creation of nicks and the use of multiple email addresses, and by extension multiple identities confirms that computer users are adjusting their performances for different locations and that the Internet contains these “locations”. The discrepancy between this and the performances of multiple identities or fragments of identities offline, is that the body is always located offline. I argue in this thesis that this makes an important difference. Despite the attempts to import or create the body online, the offline body remains the primary location of the self and for this reason online life can never become a simulacrum for offline experiences.

The films also deal with the idea of the simulation of reality. Particularly Matrix, seems to dramatise and reflect the way in which the Internet is seen to destabilise the understanding of reality. This destabilisation is already present in Baudrillard’s postmodern text that the film quotes, and the film creates a futuristic world in which computer simulated life is more, or at least as real, as ‘real’ life. The matrix software in the film could be seen as prediction of the future of the Internet, and expresses the film’s, and audience’s, fears of the way the Internet could further destabilise the “real”. Once again it can be seen that the films dramatise and exaggerate issues that are present on the Internet, but in a much reduced form. It seems that films reflect popular culture’s interpretation of the Internet, rather than the experiences of Internet users.

This thesis also enters into a discussion of the nature of Internet text and argues that it cannot be seen as the materialisation of post-structuralist theory. Barthes suggests that the focus shift from the author to the text and that the author becomes invisible in the process of writing. He also locates the performance of the text in language not the writer. This does not seem to be true of the Internet texts analysed, particularly the homepages. The Internet texts studied seem to suggest that identity has become extremely important, much more important perhaps than in offline life and than is suggested by postmodern theory. This is perhaps because it is much more difficult to create presence online. The main, and sometimes only, way to establish identity online is through text. In this text the author is the same self that is establishing the identity and so in some way places him/herself in the text. The author is not necessarily the same identity that is being represented in the text, but is tightly linked



to this identity performance through the experience of the body. This performative nature of this text is also somewhat different to what Barthes suggests. The performance is not located only in the language, which is the main conduit of online identity, but also in the identity it is constructing. A combination of both Butler and Barthes' senses of "performance" are necessary to understand the establishment of online presence.

Another important characteristic of online texts are the way they interact with each other. These interactions take the shape of writing to the parent sites and from the parent sites to the related links. In this study I suggest this is more than the kind of intertextuality and cross-referencing suggested by post-structuralism and postmodernism. I argue that it can be seen as a type of narrative, and that this and the other narratives on the Internet are closely linked to the performance of identity. This is a slightly different understanding of narrative than is usually found in literary texts, but I believe it can be expanded in future studies in an attempt to understand the way Internet texts function.

In conclusion, I have aimed to show that the Internet is a unique medium with its own structures, conventions and limitations that urgently needs to be theorised in equally unique ways. One of the functions of Internet texts is the creation of online identity. This challenges the way the relationship between identity and representation, and text, is understood. Existing postmodern models of identity and representation cannot fully account for the way the Internet interacts with other media and offline life. New analyses are required to explain the interactions between these concepts. This thesis has argued that the constructs of presence, performance and the body, will be necessary in the formation of such future analyses.



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